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STAY OUT OF SPACE!

by Dwight V. Swain

JANUARY 1958



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JANUARY 1958

Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES
NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor



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RETURN TO PHONEYTOWN

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Front cover painting by Lloyd Rognan, suggested by "Stay Out Of Space!"

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The Editorial.....

WE'RE rather proud of the cover on this issue of TALES. Not only is it one of Lloyd Rognan's best jobs for either IMAGINATION or IMAGINATIVE TALES, but it also leads off Dwight V. Swain's great new novel, written around the cover, STAY OUT OF SPACE!

FACT of the matter is, the front cover of this issue received quite a bit of praise many, many months ago. Our memory harks back to late spring when an old friend of ours came to town and sat across our desk admiring this cover. The friend was Paul W. Fairman, editor of AMAZING STORIES and FANTASTIC. Paul really liked this cover. He asked when we planned to use it and we told him we couldn't until Dwight Swain sent in the novel he was doing around the cover. This was at a time when Dwight was busy with his teaching work as an associate professor, and we weren't sure when the novel would arrive.

YEP, Paul really liked that cover. We found out how much a few weeks ago when we saw a copy of the September issue of AMAZING on the newsstands. Staring right smack out at us was our cover. Well, not *really* our cover. It wasn't painted as well, naturally, and didn't have the impact ours has. But the idea was there, as

neat as you'd ever want to see. Not, you understand, that we wanted to see our cover proudly displayed on another magazine. Not quite. So while imitation may be the highest form of flattery, we do want you to know that with this cover *we're* not the imitator!

OF course, as is always the case, we learned something from this little episode. If you've got something good, keep it hidden. We will in the future. Particularly when our friends come to town. We'll wine 'em and dine 'em but by gosh we'll stash away our precious artwork!

LEST you think we're overwhelmed with anger—we're not. In one way we're quite flattered. Guess we're doing a pretty nice job of creative editing! At the same time we can't help feeling a mite disappointed. We don't mind doing creative editing for the readers of MADGE and TALES, but we think that if we're going to do the same work for AMAZING then Ziff-Davis ought to pay us for our efforts!

RIGHT now only one thing bothers us. We can't remember how many covers we had on display that day! Maybe Z-D ought to sell us AMAZING so we don't have to worry about repetition on the newsstands

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STAY OUT OF SPACE!

by

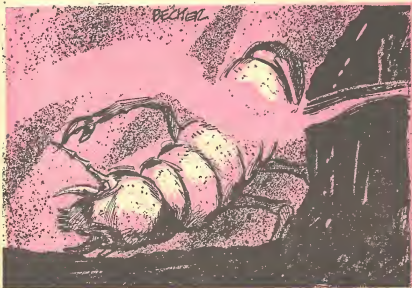
Dwight V. Swain

You can kill a man in many ways, but there is one torture beyond belief — lashing him to an asteroid in the dark, dark depths of the void . . .

THE GREY-HAIRED woman spoke into a transitrone, cool and decisive: "All units, this is Dey Z'ulle speaking. Goss is coming now. He'll be here in a

minute. Stand by present positions and prepare to give us cover as needed. Confirm, please."

A clipped feminine voice from the transitrone: "Unit One, Dey



Z'ulle. Order confirmed."

"Unit Two—confirmed."

"Unit Three—"

"Unit Four—"

"Check." With swift precision, the woman called Dey Z'ulle thrust back a lock of iron-grey hair and adjusted her rayscope's eyepiece. "Watch it, now! He's stepping into the hall . . . turning this way . . . climbing the ramp . . . —Tuber, get ready!"

She gestured as she spoke. Instantly, the two girls who stood behind her in the narrow alley stepped forward. The darker of the pair brought up a Karak tube; rested it on the pudgy blonde's shoulder. Cross-hatch sights framed the duraloid door of the building across the street.

Eyes still glued to the rayscope, the older woman moved aside a fraction. "Get ready!" she repeated.

"Ready," the girl with the tube echoed. Her stocky blonde helper made only a small, vaguely-affirmative sound.

Silence, then; silence, and the slightest hunching of shoulders.

Across the street, the duraloid door slid back. A man stepped out onto the walk and turned right, moving easily and with no discernable sign of tension.

Now Dey Z'ulle spoke again, and for the first time her voice bore the echo of a nerve-honed

edge: "Hold it, now—hold it! We need to catch him flat against the building, where he can't run." Her hand came up. "Steady—on target—"

Five seconds, perhaps, while the man walked briskly onward. Four seconds . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

"Fire!" clipped the woman.

The dark girl depressed a button at the Karak tube's base. Like magic, a cone of faint blue haze enveloped the man. He halted in mid-stride, literally, as if all at once turned to stone. Then, rocking off balance, muscles still rigid, he crashed to the pavement.

"Now!" Dey Z'ulle's voice rasped in the transitron, hoarse and urgent. "Hurry! Hurry!"

Two women darted from an entryway before her words could even die. An open seal-sack dangling loose between them, they raced to the fallen man and flung the shroud-like sheet down on him; rolled him in it.

The plastic sealed to itself with small sucking sounds. In seconds, the victim lay more tightly cooed than any mummy.

Dey Z'ulle expelled a quick, gusty breath. Then, cool and in command once more, she stepped forth from the alley and joined the women from other units now gathering about the prostrate, unconscious man called Goss. "Good

work, all of you. You'll be commended by The Council.

"Right now, though, what we need is action. Get this man to Sarah Corley's laboratory—before it's too late!"

IT WAS DARK here—dark, and with a strange feeling best described as nothingness . . . no heat, no cold, no drafts, no sounds, no tastes, no smells, no pressures.

Then, suddenly, silvery radiance rushed in and drove away the murk. Machinery whispered. Faint sounds rose of respiration, shifting bodies. The air took on the measured chill of artificial cooling.

Footsteps, approaching. Close at hand, a voice—a woman's voice, perhaps?—said, "Back, please, all of you. Let me see him." And then: "So. This is the famous John Goss."

Involuntarily, Goss stiffened. Or rather, his brain sent out the proper message.

Only something seemed to be wrong with his autonomic nervous system. Or, maybe, with his muscles.

In any case, his body lay still and chill as ice, paying no heed to his mind's commands.

It would have been frightening, had he been able to react with proper tension. But as things stood, not even fear seemed able to take

form—a unique tribute to the old James-Lange theory of emotion, Goss decided. His intellect still functioned, but everything else seemed at a halt.

Another voice: "Save your sarcasm, Doctor Corley. Your feelings on this matter are common knowledge."

"They are—?" Yes, surely this was a woman speaking; a relatively young woman, at that, poised and intelligent and with a wit-edged tongue. "Then you know I wasn't being sarcastic, Dey Z'ulle. John Goss *is* famous. You've made him so, with this whole nonsensical business. For my part, I—"

"I'm not interested, doctor. Your personal prejudices don't concern me; only your professional findings. My responsibility is to The Council." An older voice, this one; and again, that of a woman. Cool and competent, she spoke with that slight edge of authority which comes only to those who hold command.

The younger woman: "I wish it were that simple; I really do. But as an examiner, a psychogeneticist—"

"You're wasting time, Doctor Corley . . . time The Council may feel could have been better spent."

The slightest of hesitations. Goss sensed a mounting tension. Clothing rustled nervously, as if silent onlookers were drawing back.

Then, precise and clipped, the younger voice said, "Very well, Dey Z'ulle. As you say, it's you The Council will call to account."

A shoe scraped, barely audible. A hand brushed Goss' face. Deft fingers turned back his eyelid.

Again, it was the strangest of sensations. For while light flooded in, such was the paralysis that gripped Goss that he could not even bring his eye to focus. At one point, far distant, he glimpsed shining lines of plated piping. All else remained foggy, indistinct. The figure towering above him—though a golden halo seemed to surround the head, he couldn't even tell whether the face belonged to man or woman.

The fingers let go. The lid fell shut again.

Goss swore—intellectually. Frozen this way, he couldn't so much as muster anger.

Now a pressure came to the inside of his left wrist, firm and continuing.

But like an echo, the crisp voice of the woman called Dey Z'ulle interrupted: "He isn't applying for insurance, doctor. And the pulse rate hardly seems pertinent to our mission."

The fingers on Goss' wrist stiffened. "Perhaps you'd like to conduct the examination yourself?"

"I'm afraid The Council would hardly feel me qualified, doctor.

Not as a psychogeneticist. But under the circumstances, I think my suggestions at least rate respectful consideration." A sudden sharpening of tone. "Begin with the fluoroscope, please."

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, as if in response to a gesture, angry or resigned, air changes and faint rustlings told of movement. Goss felt himself lifted. Strong hands maneuvered him bodily . . . tilted him, turned him, walked with him, slid him down at last onto a smooth, hard surface. Shadow blocked off the silvery radiance. A switch clicked, sharp and clear over a backdrop of shufflings and whispers.

Dey Z'ulle speaking: "Well, doctor?"

Sarah Corley: "See for yourself. Or can't you count to thirteen?"

"Thirteen!"

"That's right, thirteen, precisely as you predicted. A normal series of seven pairs of true ribs, costal cartilage connected directly with the sternum. But below that, six sets of false ribs instead of the usual five—a thirteenth pair, an extra set at the bottom. Three pairs of floating ribs instead of two."

Goss could hear the quick intake of Dey Z'ulle's breath. "Then I'm right! The Council—"

She broke off sharply. Com-

mand replaced elation in her voice. "Put him under the cortical filter."

"The cortical filter—!"

"You heard me!" The older woman spoke with driving tension now, harsh and domineering. "We've got to turn this creature's brain inside out, discover what he and his kind are plotting. That's why we chose your laboratory for this examination. Your filter unit stands head and shoulders above the others."

A PAUSE. A faint drumming, as of fingers on a table. Then, voice surprisingly calm, Sarah Corley said, "Dey Z'ulle, you outrank me. Questioning your judgment amounts to insubordination. But no matter what it costs me, I won't let you do this. My filter unit wasn't designed for other than experimental use on humans. Even if you could make a deep probe with it—pull this man's thoughts out, strip his mind bare—you'd leave him a gibbering, sub-human wreck."

"You don't have a choice in the matter, doctor," Dey Z'ulle retorted flatly. "It's The Council's responsibility to defend all of us against the Shan. If that requires the sacrifice of this creature, it's a negligible cost, believe me." Again, a direct order: "Take him to the filter!"

Hands grasped Goss, lifting.

Sarah Corley spoke rapidly: "How can he tell you anything when he's in Karak shock? His vocal cords are paralyzed. He can't move a muscle."

The hands that held Goss hesitated. Dey Z'ulle groped: "What—?"

It was most interesting, Goss decided. His time had run out; even his minutes were numbered. Yet thanks to the Karak tube, he couldn't muster a single tremor. It was as if he were some sort of overlord, god more than human, surveying his own plight with almost academic detachment.

"If you're going to use the filter on him in spite of me, then at least do it properly," pressed Sarah Corley. "Bring him out of shock first. Check his coordination, his comprehension."

"We don't dare!" Dey Z'ulle suddenly sounded worried. "These creatures' daring is incredible; they'll try anything. All the old records prove that. If we bring him out of shock, he's liable to destroy us."

"If you don't, you'll get no answers," Sarah Corley retorted coolly. "Of course, you can explain it all in your report to The Council: 'Subject was captured and transported to the secret laboratory without event. But the dey in charge was afraid to bring him out of Karak shock, so no, information

was forthcoming.”

“That’s enough, Doctor Corley!”

The older woman’s voice shook with fury. “This creature’s very existence proves the presence of an alien menace in our midst—a menace we’d thought long extinct. Given the slightest chance, he and his kind would destroy us, betray us to the Shan. The very circumstances of his discovery, the time and money and scheming that went into his efforts to get into space—they prove how dangerous these beings are, how far their plotting’s gone. Yet you stand here mocking me, even with the living evidence before you!”

“Perhaps we differ as to what constitutes proof and evidence.” A cool gloss of self-possession overlaid Sarah Corley’s words. “The fact is, this man has an extra set of ribs. At worst, he’s representative of a tiny, unassimilated remnant of a primitive race. More likely, he’s a sport or an atavist of a chance deviation from the norm. Until I’m convinced otherwise, I see no reason to treat him like a wild animal running amok.”

“I’m curious, doctor.” Now Dey Z’ulle, too, spoke calmly, as if she had regained her momentarily-strained poise. “Before this, I thought of you merely as resenting my rank, my authority as dey. But now . . .—What was that term you used? Atavist?”

“What—?” Now it was Sarah Corley who sounded startled.

“It means throwback, doesn’t it, doctor? A reversion to a more primitive type?” Dey Z’ulle’s tone grew even more thoughtful. “Take a mixed race like ours—Huu blood, basically, but with a strong infusion of the old Earth strain. With that sort of history, Earth tendencies might occasionally crop up among us. As in your own case, for instance.”

“You realize, of course, you’re talking nonsense,” Sarah Corley interjected icily.

“I doubt that The Council will think so.” The older woman’s voice now rang with open triumph. “As a matter of fact, I’d say your only chance lies in setting an extremely high standard of cooperation.”

“I see.” For the first time, something close to a tremor invaded Sarah Corley’s speech.

“Well, what about it? Shall I report you as an atavist; recommend that we run *you* through the filter?”

A long pause. Then: “What is it you want me to do?”

“Conduct a proper psychogenetic examination, obviously.” Dey Z’ulle spoke with crisp precision. “First, put proper safeguards on the prisoner. Then, bring him out of shock, if that’s really necessary, and check his brain with the cortical filter.”

"Very well," The younger woman suddenly sounded weary. "Post guards on the exits. Then, move Goss to the infradation table."

Orders. Mumbblings. Movement. Bleakly, Goss wondered what it would feel like when they turned on the filter.

If they succeeded in turning it on . . .

A succoring thought, that last. A tribute to his heritage. Had Goss had control of his muscles, he'd have smiled grimly.

Only then, abruptly, there were needles in his body—a million billion pricking, sticking, flaring, flaming needles. His brain exploded in a mad kaleidoscope of color.

THEN, AS QUICKLY as they'd come, the colors and the needles vanished. Goss opened his eyes.

A strikingly beautiful blonde girl of perhaps thirty was speaking across him with Sarah Corley's voice: "so it's simple, really. Thirty seconds of infradation reverses the flow-pattern established by the Karak tube."

"And that gives back control of the muscles?" Dey Z'ulle, obviously . . . a spare, brisk woman with iron-grey hair and a face and manner too cold for comfort.

"Yes." Doctor Sarah Corley turned to two other women, white-coated lab assistants. "Help him up, please."

The pair took positions, one on either side of Goss, and gripped his arms.

Repressing a first impulse to rise unaided, he lay limp; forced the women to heave up his full weight.

With an effort, they got him on his feet. Half walking, half dragging, he let them maneuver him over to a huge, cone-like apparatus suspended from the ceiling, with a counterweight to move it up and down.

Sarah Corley spoke to another lab assistant: "Put a chair under the filter. He's too weak to stand."

The white-coat hurried to obey. Still sagging in his captors' grasp, Goss let his head loll loose while he surveyed the scene through lash-masked eyes and weighed his chances.

The wall to the right had two doors. Through one, slightly ajar, Goss glimpsed a corridor.

Unfortunately, a woman bearing a snub-nosed weapon of unfamiliar design stood by each of the twin exits.

The second wall, the one directly in front of Goss, had no doors. Neither did the wall behind him.

To his left, there were windows, a whole row of them—and three more guards.

Goss cursed under his breath. Then, abruptly, Sarah Corley stepped closer; gestured.

The attendants who held Goss' arms lowered him into the chair. The third pulled down the cartical filter. Box-like, it walled Goss in, its lower edge cutting into his shoulders.

The attendants fumbled with a chin-strap.

Goss sucked in a quick breath. Scooting forward limply on the chair-seat, he slid from it to the floor.

The maneuver not only got his head out of the filter; it pulled his captors off balance. They teetered precariously, unable to support his weight.

Goss chuckled, deep in his throat. With a single convulsive movement, he jerked forward.

Choked cries. The two lab attendants toppled.

Goss surged up. Lunging, he drove for the counterweight of the filter and heaved it high into the air.

The filter, released, crashed to the floor with a jangle of shattering glass and clanging metal.

Now the guards at doors and windows were leaping forward, shouting. Their snub-nosed weapons blazed streaks of pale green light.

Ducking, Goss dived for Sarah Corley.

The lovely blonde psychogeneticist still stood frozen, close by the fallen filter. Before she could even

open her mouth to scream, Goss had an arm about her waist. Locking her before him like a shield, he charged for the nearest doorway.

CHAPTER III SKY TERROR

AN ESCAPE under fire is never to be undertaken lightly. But some stand out as worse than others.

For John Goss, the laboratory scramble ranked close to the top of his personal list. Weak to begin with, and dropped down in an unfamiliar setting, he hardly knew which way to turn. Streaks of green light lanced at him from all directions. Sarah Corley writhed like an eel, more adversary than hostage, so that what had started as a mad dash for freedom now seemed likely to deteriorate into a wrestling match.

Then, to make matters worse, something hit him from behind—a numbing blow to the shoulder. He lurched round, reeling.

Dey Z'ulle stood poised hardly more than an arm's length away, a length of pipe already drawn back club-like for a second onslaught.

It was no time for chivalry. Ducking under the grey-haired woman's swing, Goss kicked for her shin-bone.

Dey Z'ulle's eyes went wide with panic. She tried to twist away. But

the movement only brought her round so that Goss' foot connected with the back of her knee. Her leg hinged. She pitched sidewise; sprawled on the floor.

Simultaneously, Sarah Corley tore free of Goss' grasp and, in her turn, grasped him, digging long-nailed fingers into his hair and scalp with convulsive violence.

Goss tried to wrench away; failed.

A guard hurled herself at his legs. A second clutched him about the waist.

Desperately, Goss stomped down on one's foot. The other he knocked clear with his elbow.

But even as he did so, out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed Dey Z'ulle, still on the floor where she had fallen.

Now, though, she had a pistol-like weapon in her hand. She was leveling it at him.

Sarah Corley, still clinging to him, picked that moment to wrench his head around to where he was anchored off balance.

It came to Goss, in a sort of numb paralysis, that this time he couldn't dodge, and Dey Z'ulle couldn't miss.

And that would spell the end of John Goss.

That instant dragged long as eternity. Goss forgot to breathe, waiting for a blast to cut him down.

Then, without warning and for no apparent reason, Sarah Corley let go of Goss' hair. She stumbled past him, knocking him aside even as she fell.

Her shoulder hit one of the girl guards. The guard crashed into Dey Z'ulle. Dey Z'ulle fired wild.

To Goss' mind, chance didn't set up double plays that good. But he wasn't about to stop to ask questions. Swinging Sarah Corley up bodily, once more he lunged for the door.

This time, by some miracle, he made it. Stumbling out into the corridor, he stiff-armed another girl guard and lurched on, seeking an exit.

A single glance told him the odds were hopeless. More armed women barred the way at both ends of the hall.

Grimly, Goss changed course, stumbling through a doorway on the side of the corridor opposite the laboratory.

The room beyond was equipped as an office, but unoccupied. Hastily, Goss slammed the door behind him, bracing it against his pursuers with foot and hip while he threw the bolt.

Sarah Corley picked that moment to claw at his eyes. Wearily, Goss fended her off with one up-flung arm, then punched her in the stomach.

The girl's breath went out of

her with a sound that was half cough, half indignation. Clutching at her middle, she skittered backward to the wall behind her and slid down it to a sitting position.

Goss watched her slump with a certain dour satisfaction. He was getting tired of women, he decided; and even a lovely blonde eventually should make up her mind as to where she stands. A man had too much to do at times like these without wasting energy trying to guess whether his hostage intended to save his life, or blind him.

Now Sarah sobbed for breath, but Goss paid her no heed. Ramming the nearest desk against the door—a door already quaking under the assault of his pursuers—he leaped to a window.

He recognized no familiar landmarks. Outside, and perhaps seven feet below the sill, lay what appeared to be a small, tightly-fenced supply yard, with piles of lumber, mounds of sand and gravel, oil and chemical drums, rusting equipment.

Goss pivoted. In three strides he was beside Sarah Corley.

SHE SCRAMBLED up before he reached her. The soft blonde hair hung disheveled now, golden halo no longer. Her lovely face was stiff with fright.

Goss said sharply, "Stop that!

I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl's eyes widened. "What—?"

Goss jerked a thumb at the window. "We're getting out. You're safe enough, unless you give me trouble."

Catching the woman's slim wrist, then, he jerked her to the casement.

The hammering on the door stopped in the same instant. Dey Z'ulle's voice echoed: "Goss! John Goss!"

Goss didn't answer.

"Give up, Goss! We can burn through this door in two seconds!"

Pulling his captive down to a sitting position on the window sill, Goss lifted her legs and shoved them outside.

"We'll burn through, Goss! We'll cut our way in!"

"Go ahead," Goss yelled over his shoulder. "Only when you slice that door, just remember it's Sarah Corley you're chopping in two, not me!"

He nudged Sarah. Fearfully, she slid on out the window, clinging to Goss' arm for support. Bracing himself, he lowered her as far as he could, till she was only a foot or so above the ground. Then, releasing her wrist, he let her fall.

She landed awkwardly, pitching to hands and knees. By the time she got up, Goss stood beside her.

But a crash above told of the office door giving way. Shrill cries of triumph rose. Feet pounded towards the window.

Whirling, snatching at Sarah Corley, Goss raced for the shelter of the nearest stack of lumber.

They made it just ahead of a fiery green streak that set boards smoking behind them. Crouching, Goss pointed to a long, low parapet of sacked cement. "Quick! Over there!" He shoved the woman forward.

Ignoring the sacks, she darted left instead, out into the open. She screamed as she ran: "Help! He's here, behind that lumber—"

Goss stopped short. Doubling back on his own tracks, he sprinted the length of the woodpile, then dived behind a mound of sand, worming his way along flat to the ground in a desperate effort to find more cover. His belly was a tight knot of fury—fury not so much at Sarah Corley—who, after all, had only followed her own penchant for the unpredictable—as at himself, for being such a fool as to give her the opportunity.

But there was no time now for rage, even. The supply yard seemed suddenly alive with prowling girl guards, each armed and with weapon at the ready. It was all Goss could do to duck from straggly shrub to wrecked earth-mover; from tarpaulined stationary

engine to gravel hummock.

Then, at last, he reached the edge of the yard, the fence.

A fence which he now discovered rose straight from reinforced concrete footings, without breach or burrow . . . a fence so high and tight and well-constructed as to appear proof against anything short of a cutting torch or Iphax detonator.

As if that were not enough, someone fired at Goss before he could even approach the barrier. Cursing, ducking like a scared rabbit, he threw himself back out of sight.

Only that was a game that couldn't last long, and he knew it. In minutes, the searchers would be upon him.

Desperately, he looked this way and that for some hiding-place, some refuge.

The closest he could come to such, it seemed, was a shallow sump pit in the lee of a stack of oil drums. And even as he reached it, slid into it, a new cry rose, and he knew that once again his whereabouts had been discovered.

Grimly, he clawed rocks from the ankle-deep grease and slime in which he stood . . . piled them on the edge of the pit in vain token of his defiance.

A woman stepped into view around a gravel-heap. Savagely, Goss hurled a stone at her.

The woman's jaw dropped. Fall-

ing over her own feet in her haste, she stumbled back out of sight and range.

It wasn't respite, and Goss knew it. Rather, call it the beginning of the end.

Only then, abruptly, a different cry rose from his pursuers: A frightened cry, far off to one side.

Another voice joined in; another.

Then, close at hand: "Look! Discs! Fear-discs!"

And from another throat, in tones of utter, shrieking panic:

"Tal Neeni help us all, the Shan are coming!"

Simultaneously, a flicker of movement caught Goss' eye. He whirled, staring.

High overhead, and far off, a swirl of strange, shining, coin-like discs were whipping down out of the sky.

Goss stood forgotten. His pursuers of a moment before now themselves were screaming, fleeing.

Overhead, more of the discs swept into view with every passing second. Full half the sky seemed spotted with them.

CLOSER THEY CAME, and closer, spinning earthward. Dust spurted as one struck the ground far off. A second sliced through the roof of a building.

The third landed less than

twenty feet from the sump pit.

For Goss, it was a baffling moment. Instinctively, and from the women's panicked cries, he knew the discs had some dangerous function. Yet from the evidence of his own senses, he knew also that he himself was not affected.

Frowning, he tried to analyze his reactions. The only change in sensation he could pinpoint was a slight feeling of psychic pressure—a queer, soundless buzzing in his brain that seemed to make him tense and edgy.

Beyond that, nothing.

Still frowning, Goss climbed from the pit and surveyed the disc more closely. About three feet across, the thing was formed of some shining metal unfamiliar to him. He couldn't tell whether it was cast or machined, one piece or several.

One thing was certain, though: The closer he came to the disc, the more intense grew the feeling of psychic pressure in his brain.

The knowledge roused new wariness in Goss. He backed away.

It was then he heard the sound, the moaning. Turning, he searched for its source . . . at last glimpsed a woman's foot protruding from behind the stack of oil drums by the sump pit.

For an instant, Goss hesitated. Then, picking up a rock, he crept stealthily towards the other.

He need have had no fears. His quarry lay prostrate, face down, her whole body convulsed with spasmodically violent tremors. The sounds that rose from her throat were incoherent. An upset can hid her head and shoulders.

Goss ran to her. Shoving back the oil drum, he turned her over.

Dun-colored hair spilled about her face. Eyes white-rimmed with terror stared up, wide and unseeing.

Goss shook the woman; slapped her.

She only trembled harder, her whole body aquiver in pulsing, rhythmic patterns.

Eyes narrowed, Goss surged to his feet and ran through the yard till he found another prostrate woman.

Pulsations rippled through her with the self-same ebb and flow as in the other.

Goss checked still more crumpled forms, more moaning women. All showed the identical tremor-pattern.

Smiling thinly, Goss strode towards the yard gate. He felt a certain smug satisfaction at seeing his adversaries so neatly hoisted on their own petards.

Only then he thought of Sarah Corley, lying somewhere too. His smile died.

But she'd fought him, as well as saved him, and that took the

edge off. Resolutely, he pried back the gate latch, left the yard, and hurried on around the building.

It was the first time he'd seen the place from the outside. Yet seeing, he still knew no more about it than before. It looked just like any other small, two-story commercial building . . . a local clinic, perhaps, or the regional headquarters of some fraternal order. There wasn't even a nameplate over the entrance.

Goss gave it small attention. More important, in his eyes, were the carrier and three pelcars lined up in front.

Running to the first car, Goss jerked open the door.

A man was already in it—a man whose whole body twitched and jerked as he slumped over the wheel.

Goss shivered and stepped back; looked up.

Overhead, the strange discs had vanished as quickly as they'd come. But meanwhile, men as well as women lay here shaking . . .

Again Goss shivered. Moving on to the second pelcar, he climbed in and depressed the lift-pedal. The gravs took hold. Rising to the standard eighteen-inch adjustment, the car swung out into the street and hovered.

Goss pushed forward the repeller. The car picked up speed.

But as it did so, a body came

into view, off to one side—a woman's body, with a tousled mop of blonde hair.

Goss BRAKED by sheer reflex. The pelcar jolted to such a sudden halt, both vertical and horizontal, that he was thrown hard against the dial. Ignoring the pain in his chest, he lurched out and hurried to the woman.

But her hair was yellow, not golden. She wasn't Sarah Corley.

For the fraction of a second Goss hesitated. Then, with a curse, he wheeled and ran back towards the supply yard behind the laboratory building. Up one aisle and down the next he searched . . . peered back of lumber piles and around sand-heaps.

Why had she had to save him, back there in the laboratory, damn it?—That is, *if* she'd really saved him. Because he couldn't even be sure of that, really. Maybe it all had been an accident. Maybe she'd slipped. Maybe, at heart, she hated him and his kind as much as Dey Z'ulle—

He found her in a crumpled, shaking knot, close by a rack of old pipe. It was hard to believe she was the same woman who'd stood before him in the laboratory, so cool and poised and lovely. Now her smooth oval face was alternately stiff and flaccid, jerking in time with the tremor-rhythm.

Spittle drooled from one corner of her mouth.

Tight-lipped, Goss bent to lift her.

But at the first touch, the first pressure, she shrieked in wild, wordless anguish. A new convulsion shook her.

Sweat came to Goss' forehead. Breathing hard, he tried again.

Again, the shrill scream of a soul in torment.

Goss stumbled to his feet, hesitated one more moment, and then turned and headed at the double for the disc that had fallen by the sump pit.

The thing still lay as before—glinting, glistening. Gingerly, Goss bent and touched it.

It seared like white-hot iron. Sucking his fingers, Goss dragged up a length of scrap lumber, shoved it beneath the disc's edge, and exerted leverage.

The craft—if that was the right name for it—moved easily. It couldn't have weighed much more than an equal bulk of magnesium. Poking and prying, Goss skidded it across the packed dirt of the yard and into the sump pit.

Water hissed. Oil smoked. Goss began scraping sand from the nearest pile and dumping it into the pit on top of the disc. In two minutes, the thing was buried; in four, the pit itself well-nigh filled.

Off to one side, someone gave

vent to a loud groan. Goss turned sharply.

It was the woman by the lumber pile. Sitting up, she leaned back against the stacked planks, gripping her head in her hands.

Goss swore under his breath. So much for his fond hopes that he might bring Sarah Corley some relief from the fear-disc's influence without endangering himself too seriously. He'd be lucky if she even recovered consciousness before he had to run for his life once more.

Pivoting, he jumped the sump pit and trotted towards the spot where Sarah lay.

He didn't even see the woman by the woodpile rising, nor the streak of green fire that brought him down . . .

CHAPTER IV DEATH RIDES AN ASTEROID

NOW THE ASTEROID came into focus on the screen—a smallish asteroid, probably not more than thirty feet in circumference. It moved against the backdrop of The Belt: hundreds of other worlds-in-miniature, all spinning slowly along their appointed orbits through the boundless black void of outer space.

Then, as the asteroid revolved, a figure came into view—the terror-taut figure of a straining, strug-

gling man whose wrists and ankles were chain-shackled to the rock. A plaston oxygen helmet encased his head, space boots his feet. The garments between had been torn to rags.

The asteroid continued to revolve. A second shackled figure appeared.

This one was beyond terror—long beyond. Where once another spaceman had fought fetters, now only bare bones remained.

The asteroid kept on turning. Slowly, first living man and then skeleton disappeared from view.

Close beside Goss, Sarah Corley spoke over the hum of the projector: "Now you see why you can't go into space, why no one can. Earth is an island, one tiny, helpless world adrift in a hostile sea. The Shan are out there, every moment—watching, waiting, dreaming of the day when they'll breach our force field—"

Like an echo, two ships of strange design hurtled up from one corner of the screen. Spurting flame-trails, they climbed faster and faster, passing close to the doom-asteroid and the man and skeleton who now, once again, had moved into the foreground.

Sarah Corley shuddered; pressed closer to Goss.

He made it a point not to respond in kind. Instead, holding his voice carefully casual, he remark-

ed, "I wonder about that business, just a little."

"You wonder—?" The woman stiffened ever so slightly. "What is there to wonder about?"

"Quite a few things. For instance, how were these films made, if it's so dangerous to go into space?"

A switch clicked. The picture vanished from the screen. "Unmanned remote-control carriers, of course." For an instant Sarah's voice seemed the barest trifle tart. "Seventeen years ago, after the first three expeditions sent into space disappeared so mysteriously, the International Interplanetary Exploration Board secretly ordered complete film coverage on the fourth run. These pictures are what came back. Naturally, the Board couldn't release them; they'd have caused a public panic."

"Naturally," Goss agreed. He smiled wryly in the semi-darkness. "Especially with such fine detail. It's quite a feat, holding a carrier that close on target by remote control."

"Ummm . . ."

"The Shan, too," Goss went on thoughtfully. "Their psychology interests me. Why do they chain prisoners to asteroids?"

A vague, noncommittal sound, Sarah moved away a fraction.

"There must be a secret, of course; a treatment." Goss spoke

with determined sobriety. "Otherwise, there's no way I can think of that anyone could keep a skeleton intact that way. And probably there's a special Shan astro-gation section assigned to keeping track of the asteroid till the Earth expedition comes along."

Beside him, abruptly, his companion sat up very straight. "What you really mean, of course, is that you don't believe any of this I've told you," she observed in a brittle voice.

"That's right," Goss nodded. "I don't. Sure, there's something going on, all right; something big. But all this nonsense about force fields and Shan bogey-men prisoners chained to asteroids—no, thanks; save that for the magazines that specialize in bug-eyed monsters."

"I see." The woman rose quickly. "Very well, then; I'm sorry I've wasted your time. But at least you can leave here safely now; there's no one on guard."

She turned to go.

Goss came forward in his seat; reached out fast and caught her wrist. "Not yet, doctor!"

It brought the woman up short. She teetered. "What—?"

"I said, not yet." Goss rose now, also, and stood beside her, still gripping her wrist. "Just because I can't swallow what you've said so far doesn't mean I don't have

questions."

"That's unfortunate, Mr. Goss. Because I don't have any answers for you."

"You will." Goss smiled thinly. "Let's start with fundamentals: What's your role here? Where do you stand in all this?"

"I've told you that already. I'm an Exploration Board psychogeneticist."

"And this chamber of horrors is a Board laboratory?" Goss snorted. "Don't make me laugh!"

THE SLIGHTEST of tremors ran through the girl. Not speaking, she looked down at Goss' hand, tight on her wrist.

Goss said, "We'll try it again. Are you really a Board psychogeneticist?"

"Yes."

"But this isn't a Board laboratory?"

"No."

"Then why was I brought here today? Who are you people? What are you up to?"

No answer.

"The Board doesn't have anything to do with all this, does it? It couldn't have. It's planning new expeditions into space; you're trying to stop them."

Golden hair rippled. The woman's lovely face lifted. "I'm not answering any more questions, Mr. Goss. So you may as well let go

of my wrist."

"On the contrary." Iron suddenly replaced the velvet in Goss' voice. "You're going to talk, and now, if only because you don't want your friend Dey Z'ulle to know you saved my neck—smuggling me in here, letting her think I'd escaped."

"So now it's blackmail!"

"Precisely."

"You really think I'm that easily bent?"

"Who knows? But the Board certainly will be interested in what you're doing."

Contemptuous silence.

"Dey Z'ulle, too. She'll enjoy being right about your atavism, your recessive traits. Especially when I explain how you worked with me from the start, and tell about the way you pressured that woman in the yard into forgetting that she'd knocked me over with her fire-gun—"

"You wouldn't!" For the first time, a note of panic rang in Sarah Corley's voice.

"Wouldn't I?" Goss pressed close; tightened his grip. "Tell me about Dey Z'ulle."

His companion's full lips drew to a thin, straight line. She didn't speak.

Goss prodded: "Look at me, Sarah."

No response.

"Are you afraid to? Is that it?"

Still no answer.

Very slowly, Goss twisted the girl's wrist.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then, quite suddenly, her nostrils flared. Her lips parted. "Wait! Please—" And then, as Goss relaxed his pressure: "She's—it's—dey's a rank, a title. Her name—it's a Huu name."

"A *what*—?"

"A Huu name. A name of—my people."

"Your people . . ."

"The Huu. We came here from another planet, thousands of years ago. We were fleeing the Shan. That's why we still have to have the force field; to protect us from them—" The girl broke off; bit her lip. "You, whether you believe it or not, the Shan *are* out there in space, waiting for a chance to take Earth and wipe out the Huu."

Goss hesitated, hardly knowing whether to frown or lift an eyebrow. "And how did I become involved in all this?" he asked finally.

His companion stared. "Don't you see? You wanted to go into space. You applied for a place in the new expedition."

"You mean everyone who signs on draws this treatment?" Goss baited. "Sorry, doctor; that's just not good enough."

Mouth tightening, Sarah Cor-

ley rose to the lure: "Perhaps I know more about you than you think, Mr. Goss."

"You do?"

"Not every applicant refuses to accept rejection. You're the only one I've heard of who's come back three separate times, each time with a new name and credentials."

"Oh?" Goss held his face expressionless.

"Dey Z'ulle has a theory on it, Mr. Goss. It might even prove correct." The girl's eyes sparkled. "She thinks you're a survivor of the old Earth strain—one of the primitives, the race of Adam that's chronicled in your Bible legends."

"Which accounts for the flouro-scope, the rib-count?"

"Of course. The old race had an extra pair of ribs, a thirteenth set. Only then we Huu came to Earth—the Eyes of the Bible, the female element in the present race, just as the primitives were the male. When the two species interbred, various characteristics of each changed. One set of the Earthling's ribs disappeared completely. That's why the story says Eve was created from Adam's rib."

"And why should a pair of ribs be so important?"

"Not the ribs; they're just identification. It's the strain that counts—the personality traits, the attitudes and attributes of the old species."

Goss frowned. "It really matters?"

"Security always matters." A shrug; a sigh. "We Huu understand; the Shan wrote it for us in blood."

"And the—primitives—?"

"They were crude and savage. To them, excitement was always worth the candle. They'd gamble their lives for a new adventure."

Goss nodded slowly.

"It wasn't too important, at first," the woman went on. She sounded ever so weary. "Only then Sikkema invented his magnetic flow drive, and space travel became practical; not like the early days, when men still were playing with rockets."

"But to leave Earth, a ship has to breach the force field. And once it's warped, the Shan can come in."

"So through the years, your secret Huu Council has played a game with the rest of the human race." Goss spoke almost as if to himself. "You've let men set up Interplanetary Exploration Boards, and make plans, and build ships. Only we never had a chance; not really. Because you Huu saw to it there were always difficulties, always accidents and problems; always some reason why men couldn't get out into space."

And Sarah: "We didn't have a choice. We knew what the Shan

would do. We had to keep Earth secure, walled in."

Goss chuckled softly.

The woman looked up. "What—?"

"I was thinking about what you said. It's too bad, isn't it?"

"Too bad—?"

"That you've failed."

Sarah stared. "I wasn't aware that we had."

"You mean you thought I'd quit?" Again Goss chuckled. "A man who'll try three times will try four, doctor. And this trip I'm going to make it."

No comment.

Goss said, "You're wondering if I'm crazy, aren't you? You can't imagine how I could even think I'd have a chance to make it." And then, with sudden violence: "All right, I'll tell you: Three times I've applied for this new expedition; and three times they've turned me down."

"But stupid primitives like me don't care about Shan bogeymen or odds or danger. All I know is that there's a ship over in the Exploration Board reservation right this minute, ramped and ready. It's a showpiece, an exhibition item—something to confuse the yokels, convince them the Board's really trying, even when it isn't."

"I've studied that ship—studied it till I know every weld and rivet in it. I've checked the plans. I've

memorized the manuals. I've scraped barroom acquaintances with half the men who've helped to build it.

"You know what that means, Doctor Sarah Corley? It means all I need now is a pass to get me past the reservation fence, some sort of permit so I can enter the ramping area.

"Just a pass, Sarah. And a Board psychogeneticist can give me that.

"You see, now? Congratulations are in order! After all this time, and in spite of all the tricks you Huu can think up, tonight I blast for outer space!"

CHAPTER V VOYAGE TO NOWHERE

A GUARD STOOD by the ramping-area gate. Boldly, Goss marched Sarah towards him, gripping her elbow iron-tight under a mask of manners.

"Well, what do you want?" scowled the corpsman, in classic disregard of all specified procedures.

"Board psychogeneticist coming in," Goss retorted. "She's got orders to run a special emergency check on the ship's neurodynamic test equipment." He fumbled out the girl's pass. "Here. Here's her permit."

The guard lounged over to the pass window and reached through.

Simultaneously, Sarah Corley cried, "No! He's a—"

Goss leaped for the guard's extended hand before she could complete the sentence. Catching the man's wrist, he heaved back with all his might.

The other came violently forward, yanked completely off his feet by the suddenness of the assault. His head hit the pass window's metal frame with a meaty *thunk*. He went limp.

Spinning, Goss leaped after Sarah Corley, now fleeing. In half-a-dozen steps, he had her by the shoulder.

She halted, unresisting. Grimly, Goss led her back to the now-unguarded gate.

The guard still lay in a heap beside the window. He had the look of a man who'd be a long time rousing.

Not pausing, Goss hurried Sarah across the ramp in the direction of the spaceship that thrust up in slim, dim silhouette against the star-studded night sky.

Closer it loomed, and closer, till at last they entered its very shadow, where the loading-ladder touched the ground.

Another guard here. Goss handed him the pass with one hand, and smashed a blow to his belly with the other.

The man bent double. Goss kned him under the chin and left him

where he fell.

Sarah Corley started up the ladder.

Goss caught her arm. "No."

"No—?" She stared at him incredulously. "You mean I'm not going with you?"

Goss couldn't help but laugh; her expression was that ludicrous. "That's right. You can go back now and spend the rest of your life being a good Huu; keeping Earth secure."

Still she stared at him, unblinking. "But—but why—?"

"Why?" For some reason, the question sobered Goss. He considered it for an instant. "Because you're you, I guess. Because you can't help what you are."

"Oh."

"The business of being a woman; the way you—most women—feel about security. . . I can see it, even if I think you overplay it. So maybe if you try hard enough, you can see the other side too."

"The—other side—?"

"My side, the side of the people you call primitives." Goss laughed harshly. In spite of him, his voice deepened; took on reasonance. "Security never built a culture, doctor. But plenty have died because the people reached the place where they were scared to take a chance. When you build a wall around yourself, you're not just shutting enemies out; you're lock-

ing yourself in. Pretty soon, you get so you're afraid to strive, afraid to be wrong. And after that—"

Off in the direction of the gate, a siren screamed.

Again Goss laughed. "You see? Too much philosophy, too much talk. Action's what I need."

He started up the ladder.

Sarah darted close; snatched at his ankles. "John, wait! You mustn't go! You mustn't!"

"I must, you mean," Goss corrected gently. "You see, I can't help being what I am, either." And then, as the siren rose again, speeding closer: "Just one question, Sarah: When you saved me at the laboratory this afternoon—why did you do it?"

"Why—?" The girl fumbled. "You know why. You stopped to bury the fear-disc. So, then—"

"Not that time," Goss interrupted. "The other, earlier. Back when I was trying to break free, and you fell and spoiled Dey Z'ulle's aim."

Even in the darkness, he would have sworn that Sarah's cheeks flushed. Her words came low: "I . . . felt responsible, I guess."

"Responsible? But why?"

"Because I was the one who discovered you'd applied three times, under different names. It showed up on the psychogenetic indices and I—I notified Dey Z'ulle."

"Spoiling her aim makes up for it," Goss said quietly. "I just wanted to say thanks."

Then he was climbing, scrambling full-tilt up the ladder, cursing himself for having delayed so long. Yet he knew in his heart the things the two of them had said were worth the hazard; it was that kind of a moment.

HE ALMOST thought he heard the girl cry, "Good luck!" through the siren's scream as he swung through the hatchway.

But that was impossible, of course. No Huu could utter such words to anyone who threatened the security of her kind.

Inside, now—inside, and leveraging the great hatch shut; spinning the locking wheels.

The control board, then: levers and dials, knobs and switches. He knew them all, knew them with the intimacy of one who has memorized the wiring diagrams and cross-checked every single circuit. Like an automaton in action, he raced from one panel to another. . . ran control tests, zeroed instruments.

Then, suddenly, there was a feeling of lightness, incredible lightness, and he knew that Sikkema's marvelous magnetic flow drive had taken hold, and that he and this ship were free of Earth and hurtling out across the void into reaches

no man had ever seen.

Flipping on the artificial gravity switch, he crossed quickly to the visiscreen and, through it, watched the planet of his birth recede.

It was a feeling to conjure with. He, of all his kind, had at last slashed off the home-world's chains and set his sights on new frontiers.

They'd be proud of him, all of them—the old men, his counsellors, giving of their wisdom and their courage; the young boys, admiring with eyes aglow; his friends, trying with him, only at last to fall short of the pinnacle, the dream.

So, now, he was here for all of them. His was the hand to strike this blow for the old Earth strain, his the destiny to fulfill the blood-heritage of Adam and adventure. His was the spirit of daring that ever rode his kind—rode them and goaded them and drove them, one and all.

What was it his father had said, those long years gone—? "Live till you die, John; and live with daring. It's a poor man who accepts blind fate without a fight and covers his eyes against his dream."

And again: "What if you do fail, John? Life's in the game, the striving. You'll never know how far you might have gone unless you try. Don't worry about odds. They'll flip for a man who can spit in destiny's eye and laugh in

death's black face."

Goss laughed aloud. He'd never felt better, never more alive.

Once again, he checked his instruments, his controls.

All in order; everything in hand.

Back to the visiscreen, now. Back to take one last look at Earth.

Earth wasn't there.

But something else was. A big something else, vague and shimmering, like a tremendous canopy hanging suspended in the sky.

Tight-lipped, Goss spun the controls.

Nothing seemed to happen. The ship held to its same disastrous course, lancing straight for the weird shape that loomed ahead.

Whirling, Goss whipped round the mobile screen.

It picked up Earth easily enough, but in the wrong place—far off to one side, beyond all possibility of navigational error or parabolic drift.

And still the ship refused to answer to its controls.

It dawned on Goss, then.

Savagely, he cursed the Huu and all their works. What good did it do to memorize manuals, trace through wiring charts, when someone else could secretly sabotage the mechanism behind the builders' and designers' backs?

The ship was moving into the canopy's shadow now, drawn as if

by invisible lines of magnetic force. Like a match-stick in a maelstrom, it swung round, faster and faster, racing towards the whirlpool's vortex.

Then, suddenly, in a rush, with a silent sound like the blast of bottled thunder, the craft swept into and through the focal point.

Instantly, all pressure, all tension, seemed to fade away. Eddy-swirled no longer, the ship drifted aimlessly, as in a strange intraspatial sea.

Stiff-fingered, Goss spun his dials; checked his screens.

AND THERE, incredibly, lay all the galaxies, all the heavens—the whole vast realm of outer space. It was as if the canopy, the maelstrom, hadn't been there; did not exist.

Goss gaped, still not quite believing.

Then, while he stared, a sphere moved into focus on the mobile screen . . . a sphere somehow familiar in its size and shape.

Goss flicked to a stronger lens . . . studied the sphere in extreme closeup.

It was an asteroid, apparently; a smallish asteroid, probably not more than thirty feet in circumference, revolving slowly as it drifted through the sky.

As it turned, heavy gyves came into view . . . great forged me-

tallic shackles designed to fit tight about human wrists and ankles. But the fetters hung empty now, without a victim, swinging free from the spikes that anchored them to the asteroid's living rock.

The boulder kept on turning.

More shackles, now . . . shackles locked to a skeleton's dangling bones.

Obviously, this was the asteroid of Sarah Corley's film. Baffled, scowling, Goss flicked back to the mobile screen's other lens.

The broader field revealed that things had been happening while he stared. Other asteroids had joined the first—a whole covey of them, assorted as to shape and size. While Goss watched, one drifted slowly closer to the tiny world that bore the shackles; bobbed against the skeleton with what appeared to be crushing force.

But nothing happened. Not a single fragile bone snapped. The delicate rib-cage dangled as before, unharmed. As leisurely as they had come together, the two asteroids moved apart once more.

Bleakly, Goss pondered, trying to dredge up answers to the jumbled questions that tumbled through his brain.

The next instant, the whole ship shuddered, rocking violently under a hammer-blow of impact. Goss sprawled on the control-room's floor.

Another blow—less violent, this time. Scrambling to his feet, Goss swung round the mobile screen.

The Great Nebula in Andromeda loomed, so bright and clear and close as to make Goss jerk back by reflex from the screen.

It was incredible, impossible. Hastily, once again he swung the viewer.

Other clusters, other nebulae, flashed by. In seconds, he found himself shifting from Omega Centauri to The Crab. . . from a close-up view of Venus' dust-clouds to the Leonid meteor swarm in scintillant display.

Then, again, the ship bumped into something.

Abruptly, Goss laughed.

It was a sour laugh, though; a laugh both bitter and heavy with chagrin.

Because at last he'd figured out the answer to his questions, all of them. At last he'd pinpointed the key, the angle.

The only possible angle.

How could anyone, any ship, bridge the gulf between Venus and Omega Centauri in less than half-a-dozen seconds? What conceivable procedure could range through whole galaxies as if they were mere rods apart?

Couple all that with the bumps, the impact. Throw in the asteroids and the skeleton that didn't smash. Consider the Huu—their slyness,

their trickery, their schemings.

Together, they told him precisely where he was—

Where else but in a vast planetarium—a gigantic model of the universe, all the heavens, created with an infinitude of realistic detail and then somehow suspended in the sky!

CHAPTER VI THE FORCE FIELD

Goss NEVER could be sure quite when he fell asleep.

The awakening was a different matter. It came with a bludgeon-blow of light, shot square into his eyes. A woman's voice lashed harshly, "Up, you! On your feet! Move!"

Groping, blinking, Goss lurched to his knees—and then discovered that he no longer lay in his stolen spaceship's control room.

Nor in the ship itself, for that matter. Instead, now, he faced walls of a weird green metal, put together in proportions surely alien. The styling of the place was different, too, and based on an unfamiliar motif. Patterns, furnishings, decorations—everything seemed slimmer, more graceful.

But his captors—two women of the type he'd come to think of as 'girl guards'—gave him no time for contemplation. Jerking him erect, they shoved him through

the nearest doorway and down a long, narrow corridor beyond.

Another doorway, then; another room. A table, king-size, and a spare, unpleasantly familiar figure with cold face and iron-grey hair cut short.

Dey Z'ulle.

Goss said, "The fear-discs must have raised an uncommon lot of hell. Can't you figure them out?"

For the wildest of guesses, the longest shot among off-beat conversational gambits, the effort proved singularly effective. Dey Z'ulle came half out of her seat, as if stabbed with a needle. "You know about them? —The mechanism? The control system?"

"Would I tell if I did?"

The woman sank slowly back into her chair. "You *do* know, then."

"I do?"

"Of course. Otherwise, you wouldn't dare mock me."

Goss held his face expressionless.

It seemed to infuriate the woman. Her knuckles grew white, pressing against the table. "Stop smirking! Don't think I won't break you if I have to!" She pushed back a lock of iron-grey hair with fingers that shook ever so slightly. "In the eyes of The Council, as well as by my own estimate, this was the most dangerous Shan assault on Earth in gen-

erations. It was only a test, of course, and on a limited scale. But it paralyzed the area. You were the only person in range not completely incapacitated."

"So?"

"Don't play stupid!" Dey Z'ulle's nostrils flared with the effort of bridling her anger. "Obviously, we need to find out how the discs work. We take it for granted there's some sort of wave-principle involved—vibratory impulses, tuned to stimulate the human hypothalamus in such a way as to evoke paralyzing terror. But the details, the practical aspects—"

Abruptly, she broke off. Her voice took on a new, even harsher quality—a cold relentlessness, grim and unbending. "The danger's too pressing to waste time on talk. You can cooperate voluntarily, or you can make me force you. Take your choice."

Goss felt a tiny knot of tension growing in him. "Just because the discs didn't freeze me doesn't mean I know anything about them."

It was as if he hadn't spoken. Eyes flicking to the guard, Dey Z'ulle clipped, "Get Doctor Corley."

Silently, the woman stepped to a nearby door and pushed it open; gestured.

Heels clicked. Sarah Corley entered. Her face was pale and drawn, the blonde hair not quite so smooth

and neatly-groomed as usual. She kept her eyes straight ahead, avoiding Goss'.

Dey Z'ulle said, "Connect the filter."

"It's ready."

The knot of tension in Goss tightened. He broke in quickly, angrily: "What's the matter with you? Work on the discs, not me. That's the way to get your answers."

Dey Z'ulle's glance washed him in cold contempt. Wordless, she rose; flicked a switch.

The top of the big table at which she had been sitting blazed light. Startled, Goss stepped closer.

Now he saw that what he'd assumed to be a table was, rather, a large, flat box with a transparent top. Inside lay one of the fear-discs, dully gleaming.

Still wordless, Dey Z'ulle moved a lever set in the case's side wall.

A jointed metal arm swung up inside the box. An elongated cylinder with double-serrate snout was mounted on the end.

Goss stared. "Is that a Rhondyke cutter?"

A CURT NOD. Deftly, now, the woman manipulated the tool's control knob. Like an extension of her own hand, skilled and precise, the metal arm within the case pressed close to the disc. The cutter's twin rows of teeth spun,

in opposite directions. Purple light speared from the snout, the beam razor-edged as it traced lined patterns on the disc's surface.

"This cutter," Dey Z'ulle observed tightly, "will slice through any substance known to the human race in seconds."

"But it won't touch this?"

"Would you like to microcheck for scratches?"

"Have you tried impact, too? Corrosion?"

Dey Z'ulle's face twitched as if Goss has pricked a nerve. She turned on him; lashed out: "Stop it! I'm sick of your stalling!"

Goss rocked back. "What—?"

"I said, quit stalling! Or shall we use the filter on you?"

Narrow-eyed, Goss studied the woman for a long, taut moment. "All right," he said finally. "Let's talk about the discs."

A tremor of excitement crossed Dey Z'ulle's face. Her eyes grew hot and eager. "The mechanism, first—" She was already groping for a diagram scaler.

Goss cut her off with a slashing gesture. "You buried them, didn't you—like I did?"

All color fled the other's cheeks. Her breathing seemed to hang suspended.

"The old Huu pattern: Security first, last and always. Play it safe." Goss chuckled softly. "I demonstrated that the discs won't

work through dirt, so you insulated dump rigs or graders and poured on sand by the ton.

"Only then, when it came time to run tests, you found the discs had all disappeared. Right?"

Dey Z'ulle pressed her palms down flat on top of the disc-case, as if to keep them from trembling. In a ragged voice, she spoke to the guards: "Take him. We'll try the filter."

"Before your precious council finds out how badly you've fouled up?" Goss laughed aloud this time. "It's too late, believe me. Even your bosses can't help but guess that burying those discs was an invitation to corrosion; that some soil element combined with their metal to destroy them. So who ordered them buried—?" He shrugged, spread his hands, "You see? There it is, no matter how you play it—that big black smear across your record!"

For a moment he thought that Dey Z'ulle would surely strike him.

Only then that tempest passed, and her shoulders slumped, and of a sudden she was just a fearful, aging woman, with face well-nigh as grey as her hair.

She said, "You're right, of course. It was—an error of judgment. But before I realized it, all the discs were gone, except for this one that had wedged in the roof of a house where we couldn't get to it as

quickly as the others."

If he hadn't seen the core of ruthlessness that lay within her, Goss could almost have felt sorry for the woman.

She spoke again, now, low-voiced and tense: "You're right about my record, too: I don't want it smeared. But there's more to this than that."

Another pause, even longer than that previous.

Then, almost in a whisper: "The force field."

Goss frowned, ever so slightly. "It exists, then? It *really* exists?"

A sigh. "Yes, it exists. It's been Earth's shield against the Shan till now—the only barrier they couldn't breach." Dey Z'ulle turned, years hanging heavy on her. "Here. Let me show you."

She crossed the room to the one door not yet opened in Goss' presence. After a moment's hesitation, he followed her.

Even this portal itself was strange . . . a great, vault-like thing, double the normal size and set on a center spindle instead of hinges. The chill glitter of antiquity was in its greenish metal.

Dey Z'ulle said, "You understand, all this is very old—this whole ship. The true, pure Huu, our ancestors, came here in it, a thousand light-years across the void from their own planet. Their science lies behind all present cultures, just

as their wall of energy, the force field, still protects us."

She touched one side of the massive door, the barest pressure. Smoothly, easily, it pivoted.

Beyond lay wonder—wonder such as John Goss had never dreamed of. Awe-struck, he stared.

For this was a place incredible, a place of dazzling brilliance. Everywhere, light blazed, radiating out as from some huge jewel's facets.

Goss threw up an arm to shield his eyes. Beside him, Dey Z'ulle said, "This room is designed to simulate a gigantic asymmetric crystal. It serves as a focal point for energy transmuted from the radiation of cosmic dust. The principle's related to that you get in the piezo-electric effect utilized in the primitive quartz clocks Earth astronomers sometimes use."

Goss drew back a step, out of the chamber; turned away from the pulsing, blazing display of light. "Would I understand the details if you explained them to me?"

"Probably not. I'm not sure I grasp it all myself." For the first time Goss could remember, his companion gave vent to what might have been a small laugh. "The important thing is that a chain of these crystal chambers is hung in space all around Earth. There's

one in the sky-scoop that trapped your spaceship; another on the dark side of the moon; two more riding artificial orbits based on conic projections from the poles. Together, these and all the others, they lock planes of energy to each other, so not even the Shan can blast a path through."

She closed the great door as she finished; leaned against it, balancing on the vertical spindle, in its middle and staring bleakly at the floor.

Goss looked from her to Sarah Corley and the guards. "And the discs—?" he prodded finally.

"I don't know. A new principle, maybe. Or maybe a chink in our armor—some spot the force field warps round; some rift or dead area." A pause. "That's why it's so vital you help us, John Goss, no matter what your race." And then, when Goss still said nothing: "Tell me: Have you ever seen a Shan ship?"

Goss shook his head.

"Here, then; let me show you." Of a sudden it seemed that the woman could not help Goss enough. Leading him to what appeared to be a scanner-plate in one corner, she manipulated a series of slides.

The thing was like a visiscreen. Swiftly, it swept out from Earth, far below, to search the void beyond.

Then, abruptly, it stopped in

mid-shift. A moment's blurring, and all at once the ship was on the screen.

Without quite knowing why, Goss found himself shivering. The craft was that peculiar, that alien. Amorphous, amoeboid, it seemed at first without form. Even its coloring was muddy and hard to pin down.

Dey Z'ulle said, "Watch, now!" and pressed a button.

A sudden spear of light lanced out of nowhere, straight at the dark ship.

But faster even than the bolt, the amorphous mass shifted. The light-spear hurtled past.

Dey Z'ulle turned off the scanner. "You see? We can't touch them. That's why we lost; why the Huu had to flee here. But so long as we had the force field, we could wait them out. Now, though—"

She stopped, cold-eyed. "Well, Mr. Goss, you've seen it now. Everything. So. . ."

Goss waited, not speaking.

"The discs, Mr. Goss; the discs! What about them?"

"What do you want me to say? That I know something I don't?"

A silence came upon the room, so heavy it echoed like thunder. Dey Z'ulle's eyes locked with Goss' unblinking.

Then, quite suddenly, she pivoted. "Doctor Corley!"

"Yes?"

"I told you we'd gain nothing this way; that the only things these fools can understand is death and violence! —Time, we need it so desperately; and then to waste it on a creature like this!"

Goss clipped, "If time's so important, get to work on that fear-disc!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Dey Z'ulle blazed. "Your kind would love to see me squander more precious hours!"

To the guards: "Take him!"

Goss stepped back quickly. "No, you don't!"

"Take him, I said!"

The two women moved closer.

Goss said, "Quit asking for trouble. The first person to touch me won't walk for a while."

Dey Z'ulle: "Weapons, both of you! Paralyze him if he moves again!"

From beneath their jackets, the two guards brought out the snub-nosed fire-guns; swung them round. Grimly, Goss fell back yet another step, behind the case in which the fear-disc lay.

Dey Z'ulle: "I'm going to have them paralyze you, Mr. Goss, for a little while. But before they do it, I want to give you something to remember for the hours that lie ahead."

Triumph rang in the woman's voice now. Her eyes gleamed in

fanatic fury.

"You see, you're going to help us, Mr. Goss! —On our terms, this time. The Council's already given me permission. They recognize now that you and your kind are natural allies of the Shan; that so long as one member of the old race remains alive, Earth can't be safe.

"That's why we brought you here from the spaceship. That's why I've given you every chance to prove you're on our side.

"But you wouldn't accept our friendship; you wouldn't cooperate. All you could think of was your barbaric compulsion to adventure; your cursed, insatiate drive to break free of Earth and out into space.

"It proves my point: You can't be trusted—not you, personally, nor any of your kind. You'd gamble Earth and all our great Huu-rooted culture on stupid, savage impulse.

"So, now, Doctor Corley's going to make a new tracing of your psychogenetic patterns... a special kind of tracing, one we can use to screen whole populations for your racial drives and traits.

"Then, when that tracing's finished, and for the benefit and security of all, we're going to check every man and woman and child on Earth against it.

"Any who fit it will die within

that hour.

"Congratulations, Mr. Goss! With you, your race comes to an end!"

CHAPTER VII BREAK THROUGH

NUMB DISBELIEF spread through Goss, stealthy and deadening. So great was his shock that for a moment even perception lost its focus. The women looked strange, the room distorted. The pounding of his heart and of his pulses hammered in his brain like giant timpani.

"Wait, now—" he fumbled, loose-lipped. "Killing me—that's one thing. But the others—my race, my people; the mixed bloods who happen to have some of the same traits—you'll find plenty who stand as more Huu than human—"

Childish words. The speech patterns of a low-grade moron.

Only that was the way with such moments. They bore too much impact, came too unexpectedly. It gave a man's brain no room to function.

Dey Z'ulle gave no sign of having heard him. She spoke to the guards: "Now! Paralyze him!"

The command seemed to cut Goss free; to slash through the bonds of numbness. Of a sudden he was in a fighting crouch—feet spread apart; head down and for-

ward; elbows in; hands up.

"Try it!" he snarled savagely. "Try it and die!"

For the fraction of a second the women hesitated, flicking uneasy glances one to the other.

Dey Z'ulle: "Fire, damn you, fire!"

Spasmodically, the weapons centered on Goss.

No more time for words, now. No more time for anything but desperate action.

Goss flung himself down and forward bodily, into the shelter of the case that held the fear-disc.

Above him, green fire laced the spot where he'd stood. Dey Z'ulle shrieked, "Get around there, in behind him!"

The ankles of one of the guards raced past the stand. Lunging, Goss caught a foot. The woman crashed headlong to the floor.

But before he could seize her weapon, there was a rush of other feet. Women swarmed over him—dozens of women, it seemed from where he lay. Their hands clawed at him—clutching and pushing, pinning him down. He couldn't even find room to swing a fist.

Desperately, he rolled to one side, hard against the uprights of the stand that held the fear-disc.

But still the women pursued him. Nails clawed at his face. Arms wrapped around his legs. And still there seemed no end to their num-

bers, their reinforcements.

Ten seconds more, and he knew they'd have him.

His head hit the stand, then.

The stand. The fear-disc.

Inspiration.

The hands were pulling him away now, out from under the case. Bodies fell atop him, deadening his struggles.

Only he couldn't give up. Not now, not when at last he had the answer.

With a violent lurch, he tore his arms free from his assailants. Clutching one leg of the stand, he groped blindly along the case that held the fear-disc, searching for the lever that controlled the Rhondyke cutter.

Buttons, knobs, switches—

The lever.

Goss seized it in a death grip . . . moved it this way and that, as far as he could in all directions.

Fingers gouged his wrist. Someone dropped on his chest like a sack of cement and began hammering methodically at his face.

Still Goss clung to the lever.

The gouging fingers exerted yet more pressure. Pain shot up Goss' arm as his opponent twisted. He knew, instinctively, that something was going to have to give. Grimly, he braced himself for the snapping of the bone.

The next instant, someone shrieked.

It was the moment in the laboratory supply yard all over again. One moment, Goss lay helpless, sore beset. The next, his assailants were falling from him like flies, crumpling to the floor in helpless paroxysms of terror.

Unsteadily, breathing hard, he pulled himself free of their weight and lurched to his feet.

The room was a shambles, a mass of wrecked equipment. And everywhere lay women—choking, gasping, shivering, shaking.

Goss managed a wry smile. Then, swaying with fatigue, he turned to the case that held the fear-disc.

It was as before, save for one thing: The Rhondyke cutter had slashed a great, gaping hole in the transparent top.

Again, Goss became aware of the sense of psychic pressure building up within his own skull. Involuntarily, he shuddered.

Only then, for no good reason he could ascertain, the pulsing seemed to fade. It was as if the rhythmic waves from the disc were ebbing, dying.

But that was absurd on the face of it, for—

He threw a quick glance at the case; stiffened involuntarily.

The disc's casing had crumbled. Now the whole thing was disintegrating, disappearing, before his very eyes!

A SPASMODIC tremor ran through one of the prostrate women close by. She went limp, no longer convulsive in her tension. Another sobbed for breath and tried to pull herself to a sitting position.

Goss swore aloud. With desperate haste, he dragged the nearest of his erstwhile opponents to the corridor door and dumped her out. Then another. . . another. . .

But there were close to a dozen of the guards crowded into the room's cramped confines. Before the fourth was out, one was on her feet; a second struggling to rise.

Dey Z'ulle's voice came feebly: "Catch him! Hold him! Don't let him get away!"

Goss charged for the door.

But now someone had him by the ankle. He sprawled at full length on the cluttered floor. Before he could recover, the door rang shut like the knell of doom.

Dey Z'ulle, in triumph: "Doctor Corley, prepare to make the tracings!"

Savagely, Goss cursed her; cursed the fear-disc, too, and the blind fate that had made it choose this moment to lose its power and disappear.

In front of him, another woman clambered to her feet.

Beyond her, on the floor, lay

one of the ugly, snub-nosed fire-guns.

Goss lunged for it. When the guard clutching his ankle tried to hold him back, he kicked her in the throat. A second and a third scrambled away before his fists' fierce impact.

And then, at last, his hands were closing on the weapon.

One assailant went down under a butt-stroke. When a second would have argued the point, Goss squeezed the fire-gun's trigger.

The woman's face seemed to freeze in the middle of a grimace. She fell like a tree crashing in a windstorm.

The others stood statue-rigid, panic written in every line.

But Dey Z'ulle only laughed, fierce and contemptuous. "So where do you go now, you fool?" she jibed. "Do you think you can get away, with that hall door locked and my people on the far side?"

Still breathing hard, Goss fell back a step till he was pressed against the wall. He didn't answer.

"Mr. Goss, you're trapped here!" Again Dey Z'ulle's bitter laughter pealed forth, vindictive and triumphant. "You're here, and you can't escape, and before we're through we'll have your patterns!"

"Maybe." Goss worked to iron the unevenness from his breathing. And then, suddenly biting off

his words: "Or maybe you'll die first!"

But if he'd hoped to gain anything from the threat, it was wasted effort. Dey Z'ulle no longer seemed the same person he'd known earlier. The chill self-control, the tight-lipped competence and unbending manner—they'd vanished utterly, replaced by a sort of reckless desperation. It was as if the woman had some pre-cognition of disaster, and so had given herself over, unchecked, to wild impulses born of rage and hate long in repression.

Now, again, she sneered at him and mocked him. "What would that matter? Do you think I've kept all this secret? The Council's other members, on Earth, would carry out our plan, even if you should somehow destroy this whole ship!"

"They would?"

"They would!"

"I wonder. . ." Goss smiled, ever so slowly. Then, suddenly straightening, he gestured with the fire-gun. His words crackled: "Get over there! Crowd to that side of the room!"

The women exchanged quick, questioning glances. Tight-lipped, Goss triggered a streak of fire, high, to speed them on their way.

They fell over each other in their hurry to reach the wall he'd designated.

The move left another wall bare . . . the wall that held the great double-door leading to the crystal chamber.

With swift strides, Goss crossed to it; then paused and checked his weapon.

There was a dial on the gun's side, and an arrow that pointed to the stamped word PARALYSIS.

Coolly, Goss turned the dial till the arrow pointed to another word, a word at the opposite end of the intensity scale: DEMOLITION.

ALL AT ONCE, Dey Z'ulle was no longer laughing. "What are you doing?"

"Killing you, if you move another inch," Goss retorted, leveling his weapon.

The woman fell back to a spot beside Sarah Corley.

Dey Z'ulle and Sarah. . . study in contrasts, as opposite as day and night.

But both of them were on the same side here. Both stood for the Huu, symbol of the female component of Earth's population. They weren't content to be part of a single race, a homogeneous species. They had to draw apart, to form themselves into a tight little secret conclave of ancestor-worshippers, condemning those traits that made for progress, made for striving. Security meant too much to them. It had become an ultimate, a god

to hallow. They bowed to it blindly, so hypnotized by its enticements that they stood eager to instigate the murder of all who didn't share their point of view.

The murder of all his kind, his people.

Only so long as he lived, so long as he had an arm with which to strike, that would never, never be.

He said tightly, "You've talked a lot about the Shan, and what they'll do to the human race. I don't know. I haven't seen them at that close range; haven't had to fight them.

"But I do know what *you'll* do, because you've made your point all over me with bruises. You want to wipe out a way of feeling and of thinking; slice away every brain-cell that holds a spark of daring. You intend to kill everyone who's seen the stars and dreamed a dream.

"That's why I'm not here just as me, John Goss. Right now, I represent all the rest of the human race—every single man, woman and child, except for your scared, security-swilling little handful.

"That means I'm not on your side, nor the Shan side either. As far as I'm concerned, the only thing that counts is that the general population should get its chance to find out some answers for itself and do the things it wants

to do—whether that means sticking tight to Earth, or sailing off across the void exploring.

"Win, lose or draw, the water's going to find its own level without any secret Huu dams in the way to stop it!"

He moved aside a fraction as he finished; poked at the great door's edge with his right elbow.

As smoothly as before, as easily, the door swung open. Again, light blazed dazzlingly from the inner chamber.

Goss said, "Friends, here goes your force field!"

He whirled; triggered the fire-gun.

Thunder exploded inside the crystal chamber—an avalanche of sound and violence. The whole ship rocked under its impact.

Then, suddenly, there was no more light; no more sparkling, jewel-like facets. Dust filled the air. Feminine voices rose, babbling and screaming.

The blast had driven Goss halfway across the room and left him stunned and sprawling. He lay there, limp, through long, chaotic seconds.

Then a cry cut through his shock-hazed brain. Dragging himself up, he looked around wildly, searching for its source.

The voice rang out again: Dey Z'ulle's voice, shrill with rising horror. She stood in one corner be-

side the scanner screen, hunched over the slides in frantic tension.

There was something in her stance and tone that stood out even amid this echoing world of tumult. Unsteadily, Goss came up behind her and stared over her shoulder.

The reason for her terror was there, spread on the screen plain enough for anyone to see.

Already, the weird Shan ship was hurtling towards Earth.

CHAPTER VIII ESCAPE

FEAR IS an infectious thing. It leaps from heart to heart and brain to brain, and those touched merge and meld, joined in and by a mighty wave of welling panic.

So it was in that green-walled room aboard the ancient Huu ship. One moment, Dey Z'ulle stood alone before the scanner screen. The next, her cry had drawn her comrades to her. A glance at the screen, and tunnel vision took over. Like magic, they had eyes only for the dark, amorphous mass of the Shan invader. Terror twisted them in its grip. The individuality of each was lost, swept into the surging millrace of shared emotion. They became one: Fear, Incarnate, alive and breathing.

To Goss, it seemed like an ideal time to make a quick return to

Earth. Quite casually, he let the horror-stricken guards press past him, while he looked around for Sarah Corley.

She stood at the edge of the group crowding closest to the scanner. Stepping up behind her, Goss touched her arm.

At first she didn't even notice. Then, when he pulled her back bodily, she whirled—eyes dread-distended, lips already peeling back to scream.

Like lightning, Goss simultaneously jerked her close and clamped a hand over her mouth.

The women knotted at the scanner didn't even notice.

Goss spoke into the girl's ear: "Is there an intercom system on this old hooker?"

His prisoner didn't answer. But her eyes' involuntary flicker called his attention to a narrow grill set in the wall beside the corridor door.

Goss said, "In thirty seconds or a minute, that Shan ship's going to be close enough to do us damage. As an artificial satellite, this outfit's a sitting duck. Our only chance is to get it down to Earth before the opposition sets up target practice. But I can't do anything about it as long as I'm locked up here."

A little of the terror in the grey eyes faded. Goss could almost see intellect battling to stem the flood

tides of emotion.

He tried again: "Don't you understand? If the Shan catch us here, they'll blast us all to atoms. But if we can get down fast enough, reach Earth, we'll have a chance to fight them off."

The flood tides definitely were ebbing now. The tight unity of blind fear was broken.

So, if intelligence would only bend a little in the right direction. . .

"You're human, Sarah. Not like Dey Z'ulle, these others. It's time you recognized it and gave your race a break."

Without another word, then, he dropped his hand from the girl's mouth and shoved her at the grill-work. He didn't even bother to grip her wrist or stay in grabbing distance. It was one of those things. Either it would work, or it wouldn't. And second chances seemed, to say the least, unlikely. For the fraction of a second the grey eyes stayed tight on him, as if measuring. Then, swiftly, the girl pressed one of a row of buttons and spoke into the grill: "Guard? This is Doctor Sarah Corley. You can open the door now. We've got Goss; he's all through giving trouble. But Dey Z'ulle's hurt, so hurry!"

"Yes, doctor!"

Goss snatched up his fallen fire-gun in one swift flow of motion.

A quick, clicking sound. The door swung open.

Face strangely pale, not even looking at Goss, Sarah Corley stepped out into the corridor.

The move gave Goss ideal cover. Heart hammering, he crowded through the exit close behind her.

There were four women in the hall. Before they could realize what was happening, Goss had them covered. Hastily forcing them into the room he'd just departed, he slammed and bolted the door behind them in the same moment Dey Z'ulle's voice rose in furious discovery.

On again, now, Sarah leading the way in abysmal silence. On endlessly — through corridors; down ramps and ladders.

Then, at last, they came to another door, set at the end of a long, tube-like passage, and Sarah said, "This is the control room. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"There'll be people here. Get ready."

She pushed a lever. The door swung open.

Two women, this time—technicians, apparently, lounging in a narrow chamber virtually walled with what appeared to be instrument panels and control mechanisms of unfamiliar type.

Goss said, "We're leaving now. For Earth."

THE WOMEN LOOKED round, blank-faced; then scrambled up in a panic of indignant haste.

Goss gestured with the fire-gun. "Hurry up! Get this thing moving!"

An uneasy exchange of glances. Then, stubbornly, one of the women said, "This ship's been in orbit a good five thousand years, they say. We can't throw it out without special orders from The Council."

"To hell with your council! This is an emergency!"

"To hell with you, you mean!" The first uneasiness of the woman doing the talking seemed to have faded. Now she appeared to take considerable satisfaction in speaking up to Goss. "Our orders are to hold this ship in orbit, under any and all conditions and without regard to individual instructions to the contrary by whomsoever given." A leer. "That's it. She stays in orbit."

Cold-eyed, Goss leveled the fire-gun. "This talks louder than words or orders either."

"Does it? We wouldn't know." The woman leered again. "Fire away, if you want to. Maybe it'll even teach you how to read these."

Her gesture took in the chamber's walls; the panels with their banks of unfamiliar instruments, strange symbols; the devices which might, for all Goss knew, just as

well be decorations as controls, and vice versa.

He swore under his breath.

Apparently his adversary caught it. Blithely, she dropped back into her seat again and made a business of resuming her conversation with the other woman.

Stalemate.

Grimly, Goss started towards the techs.

The next instant, he was slamming violently into a corner. The room careened to a crazy angle, still rocking, clangorous with a deafening din of metal crashing against metal.

The women had been thrown wide too. With Sarah, they lay against a far wall—jaws agape, eyes shock-glazed.

Bracing himself against sprung wall-plates, Goss hauled himself erect. But before he could so much as open his mouth to speak, the women were up too, spinning dials and clawing levers.

Another lurch, another shock of impact, more violent even than the first.

But with it, a sudden swift sense of acceleration. Tensely, the tech who'd talked to Goss announced, "We're moving out of orbit."

A third shock, severe beyond either of the others.

Desperately, Goss clung to a stanchion, wondering how much more such punishment the great

Huu ship could take.

As if in answer, one of the control banks tore loose from its fittings, hurtled in a line drive straight across the narrow room, and smashed into and through an instrument-studded panel.

A wail from the tech: "We're out of control! We can't steer!"

Goss headed for Sarah Corley.

Wordless, she stumbled along the wall to meet him, caught his hand, and pushed on, leading him towards the door through which they'd entered.

More passages, more ramps and ladders, while new thunder-claps of impact burst about them. A dozen times they fell. Full half their progress seemed to be on hands and knees, or sliding.

Then, abruptly, they came out into a loft-like area where slim, silvery two-place carriers stood lined up, row on row.

Simultaneously, a voice cried out behind them. There was a snapping sound, as if some missile had struck metal close at hand.

Sarah broke into a run, Goss following close behind her.

Ahead, a long chute that looked like a launching-tube yawned, one of the carriers already drawn up and locked tightly in position.

Goss jerked back the tiny ship's hood. Clambering over the cowlings, he lifted Sarah bodily and set her down in the pilot's seat beside

him.

She pressed a button. Instantly, the hood overhead slid shut.

Another button. The carrier swept down the launching-tube faster and faster. Blackness closed in on them. A high, shrill whine developed, growing louder every second.

Then, suddenly, the whine cut off, as if sliced with a razor. Star-spangled heavens leaped into view to drive away the black.

Most important of all, Earth loomed ahead, a ball of faintly-glowing green, heartwarmingly familiar in contrast to the endless void that stretched about it on all sides.

THEN A SHADOW seemed to fall across the carrier. Goss twisted sharply in his seat.

The dark, amorphous mass of the Shan ship hovered above them, a cloud of menace against the sky.

Now, too, the Huu ship came into perspective—a great green globe, an Earth in miniature.

While he watched, more carriers darted from the launching-tube, silver specks racing away before the Shan advance.

Some made it. But for many, the huge, shape-changing craft was moving far too fast. It swept them up, enfolded them in its dark cloud. Like stars blotted out, they blinked and disappeared.

Now bolts of what might have been lightning lanced forth from the dark cloud-craft of the Shan. Straight at the green Huu ship they struck—bolt after bolt, blast after blast.

At first, they seemed to have no effect.

Then, suddenly, a jagged crack appeared along the surface of the huge metal globe. Faster it spread, and faster—branching, dividing, reaching out in a spidery pattern that touched every monstrous metal plate.

The next moment, the globe broke up, first into segments and then fragments. In seconds, it was like a handful of greenish crumbs, flung broadside across the sky.

In spite of himself, Goss shuddered.

But that was futile, and he knew it. For now, the important issue was to get back to Earth.

He said, "Sarah. . ."

She didn't answer.

"Sarah! Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

A glance, quick and scornful; biting as the raw wind that sweeps across the arctic sea.

But no words. Not one.

It stayed that way, minute after minute, while the tiny carrier hurtled on through space at ever-faster speeds, and Earth grew and grew till it filled the ship's entire vision slot.

Then at last they were circling, landing. . .dropping down on a small, square ramp thick-fringed with trees.

Sarah led the way to one of a dozen or more parked pelcars.

Unhappily, Goss got in with her.

In an hour, they were in the city, pulling up beside the building where he'd stayed . . . the self-same building from which he'd stepped out into peril and chaos hardly more than a day ago.

The pelcar dropped down onto its blocks. Tight-voiced, Sarah Corley said, "Get out."

It was an order, not a request. For a moment Goss hesitated, staring at the girl. But he couldn't seem to find the right words so, shrugging, he slid to the pavement and started away.

"Wait."

Sarah again. Tight-lipped, Goss turned.

The girl said, "I think there's something you should know, Mr. Goss. I'm not really stupid. Back there on the ship, when you asked me to help you, I knew all you wanted was to get away.

"I wanted you to, too. That's why I told the guards to unlock the door. I betrayed my people for you; doomed Earth, broke my oath, threw away my honor.

"Now I never want to see you again."

Gravs grinding, the pelcar raced away.

CHAPTER IX LAST GAMBLE

THE AMPLIFIERS were blaring again now: "Attention, all! Another Shan message has been intercepted! Apparently invasion preparations are under way. Landings may be expected at any time. Meanwhile, take shelter, but do not panic. Further disc attacks are coming! The first wave is expected to arrive within three minutes—"

Goss hurried faster. The weight of the heavy suitcase had grown to well-nigh more than his weary arms could handle; and to be out in the open during a disc raid was the last thing he wanted. It called too much attention to the case, and to his own unique immunity to the waves of fear that radiated from the discs. Sooner or later, some sharp-eyed Security man would note and link such items, and then—

Goss cringed at the thought.

Yet time was so precious he dared not postpone action by even a single moment.

But what if Sarah Corley were gone? What if he couldn't find her?

Grimly, Goss shifted the bulky case to his other hand; pushed the

thought out of his mind.

Just managing to maintain your sanity on Earth, this past twenty-four hours, had been an achievement. Time after time, the world had wakened to the screams of sirens. And time after time, likewise, thousands upon thousands of shining disc-shaped craft had swept down from the distant Shan ship.

Terror came with them . . . the same, rhythmic, panic-pulse Goss had witnessed back in the first experimental raid.

Now, though, the discs struck everywhere, not just in limited areas. While islands and coastal districts took the least punishment, relatively speaking, there was no dearth of the flat, coin-like craft anywhere. It seemed unlikely that any land-bound human had succeeded in totally avoiding contact with the fear-waves, even for this short a time.

Nothing seemed to damage the discs, either. Diamond drills, explosive shells, corrosive washes, electrical charges, radiation—Earth had tried them all, but not one disc had broken.

Yet within a few hours, incredibly, all disintegrated, disappeared!

Even more startling had been the messages.

Whether they were really messages or not, and whether or not the cryptanalysts and linguists

actually had succeeded in making sense of them, there seemed no question but that Earth's electronic listening devices had picked up a variety of strange wave-patterns radiating from the Shan ship. "Interpretive decryptments" had been made, allegedly to the effect that a Shan invasion was imminent.

And if it really was—Goss shuddered and drew his aching, sweating fingers tighter about the suitcase handle; lengthened his weary stride.

An intersection. Goss checked the sign.

It was the street on which the directory said Sarah Corley had her apartment. Pivoting, Goss strode right, checking house numbers.

Only that turned out to be unnecessary, because suddenly a slender blonde girl darted down the steps from a building entrance just ahead, golden hair dancing.

Sarah Corley. Goss broke into a stumbling run.

Sarah's eyes came round at the sound of his feet. At the sight of him, her face stiffened. Whirling, she raced headlong in the opposite direction.

Goss swore. Gingerly, he lowered the suitcase to the sidewalk, then sprinted after the girl.

He was panting before he finally caught her.

For a moment, she fought like a wildcat, kicking and scratching.

Then, when Goss' superior strength at last cut short her struggles and dragged her back to the suitcase, she turned frigid—standing stock still, unmoving save for the quick rise and fall of her breasts, grey eyes hot with anger in a cold and hostile face.

Goss said, "Go ahead, hate me. But I had to find you. It's our only chance against the Shan."

"Against the Shan?" The girl's laugh was bitter as tea steeped hours too long. "I must have misunderstood you, Mr. Goss. The Shan wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you."

"Correction. The first discs landed while I was still in your supply yard. The Shan aren't doing anything they hadn't already done before I knocked your force field down."

"I don't care to discuss it."

"Then let's not." Goss swung her round. "Come on."

"Come on? Where?" Of a sudden a panicky note crept into Sarah's voice despite its surface shell of ice.

"To that carrier you brought us back to Earth in. You've got to play pilot again."

"No!"

"Do you think I want to ask you?" Goss had trouble keeping his own voice steady as he picked up the heavy suitcase. "I'd do it my-

self, if I knew how the thing works."

"I said no! I won't do it!"

"You will!"

"No!" With a sudden twist, Sarah jerked free and ducked past Goss.

"Stop!" He snatched at her as she passed; caught sleeve instead of arm; felt the garment rip even as his fingers tightened.

But the fabric's tug had pulled the girl off balance. It slowed her for a second. Letting go the suitcase, Goss grabbed her wrist.

"Hey, what gives?" A man speaking, come out of nowhere. A big man, burly and belligerent.

A SINKING FEELING began to take form in Goss' midriff. "It's nothing, mister."

"Oh, no? Well, maybe I don't see it that way."

"All right, all right, so you don't."

"Another thing: What's in that bag?"

The sinking feeling drew into a full-fledged knot of tension. "Nothing, nothing important. Just some stuff of mine. I'm moving, trying to find some place where there aren't so many of these damn' discs."

"Let's take a look in the bag."

"Now, wait a minute, mister—"

"You wait. I'm Security. Open it up."

Tight-lipped, Goss stared down at the gold badge the man displayed.

It was all his nightmares come to life. Shifting his weight a fraction, he debated his chance. A good, solid right to the man's bulging belly, perhaps—

"Hurry it up, you!"

Goss breathed in carefully, trying not to telegraph his punch.

But before he could strike, a flicker of shadow passed across his face. The next instant, a crash echoed close at hand.

Simultaneously, Sarah Corley and the belligerent man both crumpled to the pavement, their bodies convulsing with rhythmic tremors.

Startled, unbelieving, Goss looked up.

Overhead, Shan fear-discs speckled the sky like swarming insects—discs by the hundreds, by the thousands—

Goss lifted Sarah and slung her across his shoulder, heedless of her anguished screams. Running to the nearest abandoned pelcar, he loaded her in.

Back for the suitcase, then. Loading it in beside the girl, he took the pelcar's controls and headed the vehicle at full speed for the secluded field where the sleek Huu carrier lay.

He still wasn't quite sure what he'd do when he got there. Once

the Security man recovered consciousness, the alarm in all likelihood would go out; not even the stupidest official could fail to spot the coincidence of heavy case and disc-immunity.

Then the hunt would start—not a blind hunt, this time, but one with a description of one John Goss to guide it. . .

Even worse, Sarah unconscious was also Sarah useless, so far as piloting was concerned. And while a variety of equipment already had come into use to provide insulative protection against the fear-discs' waves, none of it was light or compact enough for use aboard the tiny skycraft.

In the end, that problem proved fortuitously simple of solution. A disc lay less than a dozen yards from the carrier. When Goss shoved it under, Sarah promptly regained her self-control.

Goss squatted down beside her. "Lie quiet a minute. You're going to need your strength."

No answer.

"The place I've got to reach," Goss pressed on, "is that planetarium affair your people used to film those horror shots of the man chained to the asteroid. Once you land me there, you can go your way. You won't be bothered with me any more."

Still no response.

"Would you rather I talked a-

bout responsibility? You Huu share it, you know. If it hadn't been for the way you kept men out of space, Earth might have managed to develop some weapons against the Shan."

Silence.

Goss' tension turned to sudden anger. "You can't be this big a fool! Don't you realize what all this means—this fear-disc business? The Shan are softening us up—preparing to occupy Earth, make us a colony! That's why they haven't blasted us like they did your Huu ship. They want our world intact, undamaged."

Sarah Corley's lips drew together slightly.

"You don't believe me?"

"Should I?" The woman threw him a cool, contemptuous glance. "You give me no credit for having a mind at all, do you, John Goss? You take it for granted I can't see past your pseudo-logic."

"Pseudo-logic—I!"

"What else would you call it? If what you say is true, why haven't the Shan already landed? Why should they hold off this way, bombarding us with discs and more discs?"

"Do you think they check their plans with me, every hour on the hour? How should I know?"

"If you don't, I can't understand why you're so anxious for me to fly you out to that old Huu

space platform."

Goss slumped down, all at once overcome with a weariness that seemed to reach clear to the marrow of his bones. He didn't even try to answer.

Sarah again: "Do you know what the word 'erratic' means? Freakish? Inconsistent? You're all of them, and more! Twenty-four hours ago, I told you I never wanted to see you again, and you didn't even shrug your shoulders. But today, here you are back again, staggering across my doorstep with a suitcase—"

A sudden pause. "That suitcase. What's in it?"

Goss STARED at the ground briefly. Then, quite calmly, he answered, "An Iphax detonator."

"An Iphax detonator—I"

"Yes."

Sarah Corley's eyes distended. Her expression held a sort of frantic horror. "No. It can't be. No one could get one."

"You'd be surprised what you can get," Goss observed dryly, "if you can walk around wherever you feel like while everyone else is having disc convulsions."

"But what will they do to you—?"

"Shoot me on the spot, probably. Security doesn't care much for characters who steal top-priority weapons."

"But why, John? Why?" Of a sudden Sarah Corley was on her knees beside him. "You must have known what you were doing. Or didn't you realize—?"

"I realized, all right." Bleakly, Goss stared off into the distance. "Only sometimes a man runs into things he has to do, no matter how crazy they look to other people."

A low moan from Sarah. She buried her face in her hands.

Then, after a moment, she rose, swift and graceful.

Goss looked up, questioning.

"Come on." She gestured to the tiny carrier. "I don't pretend to understand you, John. But if what you want is to go out to the platform with that case, I'll see that you get there."

"Thanks."

There was silence, then. . . what seemed to Goss like endless silence. Clumsy with fatigue, he loaded the suitcase into the flyer and climbed aboard himself. Beside him, Sarah pressed buttons. In seconds, they were speeding upward, into the bright vault of the sky.

Then, ahead, at last, he glimpsed the strange, shimmery shape of the huge enclosure that was the Huu space platform, with its monstrous planetarium and artificial asteroids.

The place where he would rendezvous with destiny.

Of a sudden, his eyes burned, and his mouth was cotton-dry. The muscles in his middle drew tighter and tighter.

Skillfully, Sarah maneuvered the carrier through some sort of lock; let it hover, unmoving, in the strange sky-microcosm beyond.

Narrow-eyed, Goss searched out the asteroid with the skeleton, the shackles. When the carrier came close enough beside it, he slid back the cowling, hooked the shackles to the flyer so the two craft couldn't drift apart, and set about his appointed task.

Close up this way, the asteroid looked less forbidding. Skeleton, shackles, and planetoid alike were shaped of painted plastic. And since the plastic cut easily, it was no trick at all to hack a hole through the outer shell and wedge the Iphax detonator inside the hollow sphere.

By the time he'd finished, the contact points were attached to the wrist shackles, and the hole in the asteroid repaired so that only the closest of close-range scrutinies revealed that surgery had been performed.

Now, once again, he turned to Sarah Corley. "Is there a way we can get this thing out of here—let it float free in the void?"

"I think so. The locks should carry it through if we work it close enough." The girl shot him

a half-worried, half-questioning glance. "What is it you're trying to do?"

Goss smiled, ever so thinly. "I thought you'd guess. The Shan are impregnable to outside attack, so far as we know. But an Iphax detonator going off inside their ship—"

"Inside—!"

"Why not? The Shan picked up as many Huu carriers as they could catch when the big ship blew. If they see a thing like this asteroid floating through the void close by, it may arouse their curiosity enough so they'll want to scoop it up so they can look it over.

"Then, once it's in, I'll fire the detonator, and that's the end of the Shan, because the Iphax is a catalytic unit. It sets up a chain reaction, renders all elements fissionable and explodes them, so long as there's anything left at all to feed the blast. That's why Earth put them under Security jurisdiction. Trigger one on any world, and there's a good chance the whole planet would be destroyed."

A shiver ran through Sarah. "But how can you fire it? A remote unit—?"

"Not remote. Proximity." Goss managed a dry chuckle. "You see, I'm the bait; the hook to catch Shan interest. I'll ride the asteroid right in, just like in your films. And then. . ."

Breaking off in the middle of the sentence, he clambored up onto the carrier's cowl; snapped the first of the shackles into place around his ankle.

Sarah Corley still hadn't spoken. She sat as if paralyzed—face stiff, eyes wide with incredulity, disbelief.

GOSS SNAPPED the shackle around his other ankle.

The sound, the movement, seemed to break the woman's spell. She cried out—a hoarse, choked, gasping cry, not quite coherent.

"Easy, girl."

"John, no! No!" She came up in her seat; threw herself towards him. Hysteria was in her voice.

Awkward, off balance, Goss still managed to catch her by the shoulders and push her back down. "This is one of those things, Sarah. You can't do anything about it."

The girl's babble didn't even make sense now. She struggled till it was all Goss could do to hold her.

"Stop it, damn it! Do you think I want to do this?" In desperation, he shoved her back again and slapped her hard across the face.

The hysterical keening died. Still staring at him, she brought one hand to her cheek, touching the scarlet marks left by his fingers.

Goss said tightly, "Heroics aren't my specialty. But you just might

be right—all those things you said about me dooming Earth by breaking down the force field and letting in the Shan. So I figure the least I can do is try to repair the damage."

Turning, he snapped the shackle onto his left wrist.

But now, like lightning, the girl flung herself bodily upon him, leaning far out of the carrier to catch him in a convulsive grip, arms tight about his waist.

It was more than Goss could take. Savagely, he drove his free right fist to the point of the other's jaw.

Sarah went limp; and for a moment it seemed to Goss that poised as she was she must surely fall.

Only then, somehow, he managed to get hold of her and to maneuver her clumsily back into the carrier's seat. For one last moment, he stared down at her, trying without avail to control the tightness that kept closing off his throat.

But time was too short for that sort of thing. Already, the Shan attack might be getting under way. Grimly, Goss slid on his oxygen helmet, then unhooked the last shackle from the carrier cowl and shoved off, swinging the bulky *ersatz* asteroid awkwardly into the platform locks.

It was the end of something, and he knew it. But thanks to his own

efforts, Huu control of his home world was ended, and in a few hours more, with luck, the Shan threat too would be forever dead.

It was almost enough to take the sting out of dying.

The asteroid began to move now, bouncing and bumping into the locks.

Tight-lipped, Goss turned, straining for one final look at the carrier, and Sarah.

Only now, incredibly, two carriers hovered side by side where one had lain before.

Two carriers; and in one sat a spare, aging woman with iron-grey hair cut short and a cold, too-competent face.

She turned at the same moment as did Goss. "A fine idea, Mr. Goss!" she called across the widening space between them. "I approve heartily. And since Earth and I both apparently are going to survive, you can count on it I'll live to see the Huu back in full control!"

Her hand came up in a mocking salute as she finished. She was still laughing when the edge of the space-lock cut her off from Goss' view.

CHAPTER X THE SHAN

BEGIN WITH a dark, amorphous mass that somehow moves itself with lightning speed across

the vastness of the void.

Then, introduce a flap of sorts—a kind of sky-scoop that opens in the mass to suck in prey.

For Goss, even—planning it; expecting it—the experience was born and bred of terror. One moment, he was drifting through the star-spangled, everlasting night of outer space, shackled to an artificial asteroid in a role no man had ever played before.

The next, the great Shan ship was hurtling towards him. The scoop opened. Man and asteroid alike swirled into utter blackness.

Desperate, hanging onto reality by the barest thread, Goss clenched his teeth.

More blackness—echoing eternities of blackness, so black as to make a man cry out aloud for the sheer solace of hearing a human voice.

Then, abruptly, the darkness faded. . . gave way to a haze of pale violet light.

Grimly, Goss waited, biding his time.

Still the asteroid moved on, deeper and deeper into the Shan ship's bowels. The light grew brighter—a dazzling light, now, almost overpowering in its intensity.

Another moment, and the asteroid bumped against a low, shelf-like ledge. Beyond lay banks of tall, thin, vertical tubes, each spilling out eddies of the violet light.

Other tubes, horizontal, bored straight into the walls like tunnels, though their diameter was too small—less than a foot—for Goss to imagine intelligent creatures moving through them.

In any case, he could see no opening anywhere large enough to allow for human use.

Which made this the end of the line where the asteroid was concerned. . . the terminal point for one John Goss.

Because he'd come for one purpose, and one only: To fire the Iphax detonator inside the Shan ship's hull.

The quicker, the better. Now, before something happened; before he lost his nerve.

Sarah Corley—? He didn't even dare think about her.

As for Dey Z'ulle. . .

Frustration, helpless fury, roiled in Goss. Cursing, he shoved the detonator contact shut.

Nothing happened.

A numbness came to Goss—a terrible aching, quaking anguish that was more than he'd thought it possible to bear. Jerkily, he fumbled loose the catches on the wrist shackles; tried again to fire the detonator, and yet again.

Still nothing.

It dawned on Goss that he was shaking, sobbing.

Was this what he'd thrown his life away for? Had he played out

his game in the face of all the odds, only to find here at the end that the prize was clay beneath the gilt?

Yet that would be the way of it, of course. Of course. The Shan wouldn't take in foes without some control device, some mechanism or suppressant to protect them against just such schemes as this.

Or perhaps the flaw was at the other end, in the detonator. After all, what did he really know about it? Maybe the things he'd read were wrong.

For that matter, consider Security's angle: Would the men in charge have dared to leave even one such device in working order, anywhere on Earth?

So this was how it ended. All his plans, all his dreams—a psychiatrist could have told him beforehand they were the product of a disordered mind.

He wondered how long it would be before his oxygen gave out.

In the same instant, he heard the drone behind him . . . barely perceptible, at first, but growing louder.

Lurching, swearing at the shackles that still held his ankles, Goss craned, searching the great arched passageway that led to the scoop and out into the void.

And there, incredibly, was a tiny, two-place Huu carrier sweeping in.

Sarah Corley sat at the controls. At least, Goss thought she did, though he couldn't be sure for a moment, because his eyes kept hazing till he couldn't see.

Then, so fast he could hardly believe it, she was there beside him . . . clambering out of the carrier onto the violet-lighted ledge . . . fumbling, trying to help him with the catches of the ankle shackles—

A sound, then. . . a new sound, one such as Goss had never heard before.

Instinctively, he looked up, searching for the source.

IN THE SAME MOMENT, something slid from the nearest of the horizontal tubes, the tubes that bored like tunnels straight into the glowing violet walls.

It was a worm, Goss thought at first—a gigantic, loathesome, dead-white worm, full seven feet long and moving swiftly towards them across the shelf-like ledge.

Then, looking closer, he saw that the thing had legs of sorts—: at least two pairs per segment, like a millipede.

There again, though, the analogy was deceptive, for certainly this creature was like no millipede ever seen on Earth.

Desperately, Goss kicked his left leg-iron, and tore his nails bloody on the right.

But the catch still stuck, some-

how. It wouldn't give. It wouldn't turn him free.

Savagely, he shoved Sarah Corley backward, away from the advancing worm.

The next instant, the thing was upon him.

Hanging precariously to the wrist shackles, Goss kicked violently at the creature, aiming for what appeared to be primitive eyespots set high in its head.

Light lightning, the thing dodged. A pincer-like foot—or was it hand?—whipped up something that looked like a pencil and speared a thin beam of black light at Goss.

The ray caught him high in the shoulder; and such was the pain of it that involuntarily he screamed aloud.

Then another scream slashed through his. By sheer reflex, he swung round.

Sarah stood with her back to the ledge's edge. Three of the worm-things were advancing on her.

But Goss' own adversary was writhing closer, too. Again, black light lanced out. Again, Goss screamed.

This time, though, he kicked as he screamed. His heavy boot struck the worm-thing. The creature recoiled, moving with a jerkiness that told of unvoiced hurt.

The retreat gave Goss precious seconds. Frantically, he tugged and

tore at the ankle shackle.

Then, when he had all but given up hope, it pulled free. Goss spilled forward bodily onto the ledge.

In an instant, the worm-thing was upon him, rushing at his head.

Spasmodically, Goss twisted sidewise and drove both feet at the loathesome, segmented body.

The blow struck home with solid impact. The worm skidded sidewise, off the ledge's edge, there to hang suspended in space, not falling because of the lack of gravitational pull, yet unable to progress because of the lack of anything to cling to.

Scrambling up, Goss raced towards Sarah.

She stood with her back to one of the glowing vertical tubes, now, away from the ledge's edge—a mistake, certainly, for it gave her no area of refuge from the worm-things. Already, they were crowding in closer and closer, each time more daringly, as if searching out the girl to find if she were in any wise dangerous.

In a rush, Goss was upon them—kicking and stomping, dodging and charging.

But it was hopeless, hopeless. While his boots might hurt the worms, they didn't seem to kill or cripple.

And there were three worms—no; seven now—to one of him.

Against such odds, he couldn't last more than a couple of minutes.

But at least, he could try.

Fiercely, he lunged at the largest of the worms. Hooking a boot beneath it, he flipped it partly over and drove in, smashing at the ugly thing's smooth underside.

The creature's segments drew together in a convulsive, self-protective movement. Its feet, its legs, dug into Goss' knees, gouging and slashing. Again, pain raced through him. He felt blood spurt.

So now there was crimson on the dead-white of the worm; the violet-lighted ledge. And still Goss fought, leaping high into the air and driving his heels down in his efforts to smash through his foes' smooth, hard integument.

Another worm lashed back at him. More blood spurted.

Then, suddenly, one worm was writhing from Goss' path and shriveling. A second followed. A third.

The others seemed to freeze. An instant later, they were turning on their own tracks, racing for the tunnel-tubes from which they'd come.

Goss stared after them incredulously, unable to believe his eyes.

But now Sarah Corley was crying out; running to him.

Three steps she took—and on the third, the ledge gave way beneath her. Barely in time, he

caught her and dragged her on across a spreading crevice.

Face fear-strained, she stared down at it. "What—?"

Goss slapped a hand down on his right knee. It came away smeared with blood. Pivoting, he strode swiftly to the nearest vertical tube and smudged the blood along it.

For an instant, nothing happened. Then, with a hissing sound, the tube dissolved before their very eyes.

"The blood—!" Sarah gasped. "That's it! The blood!"

But Goss spun her around. "Quick! The carrier!"

As one, they raced towards it. . . scrambled hastily aboard.

ALMOST in the same moment, turbulence churned the thin atmosphere about them. In seconds, the carrier was swept like a torrent-tossed chip back in the direction from which it had come—back through the giant arch, the passageway; back into the blackness of the scoop.

And then, with amazing swiftness, out again—out into the starlighted black velvet of the void.

The Shan ship had already disappeared from view before they could even know for sure they'd left it.

Now, looking out at the skies about them, they knew it had been traveling even before it spewed

them from its maw. These were unfamiliar worlds; strange galaxies. Nowhere, nowhere, could they find even one star that they could name.

For a long moment, they sat in silence. Finally Goss said, "At least, Earth doesn't have to worry any more about the Shan."

"No." Sarah Corley sighed a little. "I still can't realize it, quite. It seems too simple."

"The salt, you mean?" Goss laughed, a trifle sourly. "We should have known, of course. Everybody should. Why else would the Shan refuse to land, except that our world held some element they couldn't tolerate? It accounts for so many things—the way they avoided the sea with their fear-discs; the way the discs disintegrated whenever they were buried or exposed to air too long; the very fact that their ship was shrouded in some sort of covering—obviously, a scheme to protect the metal, in case of accidental contact with saline atmospheres."

"But apparently they didn't know that human blood is salty too." This from Sarah. And then, with sudden laughter: "Oh, what a glorious point nine-tenths of one per cent that salt in our blood is!"

"So, no more Shan." In spite of himself, Goss said it just a trifle grimly.

"On Earth, you mean?" The

laughter in Sarah's eyes and voice went dead. Then, after a moment, she added, "No more Huu, either."

Goss looked at her, not speaking.

The grey eyes brimmed. The ripe lips trembled. "John—John, I killed her, Dey Z'ulle. She tried to stop me, when I came to and found you'd gone and knew I had to follow. I didn't care what happened to me; I only knew I couldn't let you die alone. So when she pulled the fire-gun, I wrestled with her, and then—and then—"

Her shoulders shook. Ever so gently, Goss put his arm about her; held her to him.

The moment passed. Slowly, Sarah raised her face. "John—"
—a helpless gesture— "—these worlds—they're none at all we know."

"Does that matter?"

Hesitation, for the barest fraction of a second. Then, slowly, Sarah shook her head. "No, I guess it really doesn't. Not if we can find one that's habitable before what little fuel this carrier holds gives out."

"We will," Goss said. "Count on it. We've come too far for our luck to play out now."

"It's time we started, then." Deftly, Sarah pushed three buttons . . . stopped short with a sound that might have been a giggle. "John..."

"Yes?"

"Shall I call you Adam?"

"Sure thing, Eve," he grinned back.

Truly, it was a lovely world they found.

The End



"I think I've hit on what this rundown feeling of yours stems from, Mrs. Burt."

Everything seemed natural on the surface when Hugo returned to Earth. Yet somehow things were not really the same. His homecoming was a—

Return To Phoneytown

by

Tom W. Harris

“WHAT’S WRONG, sweetheart?”

Hugo St. John turned from the window. He realized he did not know how long he had stood there staring into the dusk.

“Nothing, Margie. Nothing.”

The cool-warm air of summertime rippled sweetly on his bare flesh as he crossed to sit on the bed. He slid his hand up Margie’s side, tickled a rib, walked his fingers across her shoulder.

“You’re very lovely and I’ve been in space six months. What could possibly be wrong?”

She smiled—a smile as voluptuous as taffy. “It was good just now. It’s still good, isn’t it?” Beneath the excuse of his tickling fingers she wriggled her shoulder.

He had to catch his breath. “Yes—it’s good.”

And it was. He could find no

really logical reason for it not to be, nor for anything in their life not to be, yet, with no logical reason, there was his feeling that something was wrong.

He pleased his fingers on her soft skin. “Can you feel the breeze from the window on your skin like—almost like a very tenuous fluid—and pleasant?”

“Of course,” she answered. “Why shouldn’t I?”

He opened his mouth but bit the words back. He rose and walked over to the window.

“Richmond makes a big glow in the sky,” he said. “I’d like to go over there sometime.”

“Oh!” she said, her voice a little scared. She walked over and put her hands on his shoulders and rubbed her hair against his cheek. “Nobody in Pleasant Cove is supposed to go over there.”

“I know that,” he said irritably.



"But we *can* go. I helped make that city; I and the others that blast off from Pleasant Cove help keep it alive. If we want to go over there we can—it's not a law, it's a class-B ruling."

"Tomorrow let's take a tour bus, then," she said. "It's been a while since I got into Richmond myself."

He spun to face her. "Bus be damned to hell! Jail on wheels! What am I—a citizen or a devil-damned tinkering tourist? I want to go over and stroll around and have a drink and talk to people, and after awhile come back home, all on my own schedule."

He noticed with surprise that he was trembling. He didn't care. He gave her a shove that sent her walking backward to topple on the bed.

She watched from the bed. From the corner of his eye he watched her watching. Her face registered worry, a trace of anger, it was not detectably different from what you might expect from any normal human. From her smallest gesture to her most delicate shade of thought, he had never been able to detect a thing about her that didn't . . . that wasn't . . . he didn't even want to put it into words.

"Wear your uniform," she said with sharpness and with tenderness.

"Your captain's uniform, so they'll at least know who you are."

"Yes," he said. "Thanks."

They would know—anyone—from the emblem on his black-and-silver uniform that he was St. John, captain of the *Michelson-Morley*. It might help, if he should need help.

When he was dressed she came to him. "I'm going alone," he said.

"Be careful," she said. "Who knows what it's like after a thousand years?"

"I love you," she added.

He turned her face up and kissed her, not knowing if what he felt was love or a kind of pity because, after all, there was nothing she could do to help. Then he left.

He took the scooter. It was only seven o'clock—he would spend a couple of hours around Richmond and then come home. It was partly just the doing of it that was important, and it might even help him with Margie.

In the starlight the block was a white shining sword across the road at the town limits of Pleasant Cove. He stopped the scooter and a guard stepped from the guard shanty. Through the window he could see the second guard watching, seated at a desk.

"I hope you're not going into Richmond, sir."

The man's servility irritated him.

"Of course I am. Lift the bar, please."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I can't do that."

St. John snorted. "No law against it—you know that as well as I do."

"You're sure there's no law?"

"You insinuate I'm an idiot? Open the gate, man!"

"But—you're going alone. Nobody does anything alone, by themselves, sir. Isn't anybody going with you?"

HUGO'S HAND balled into a fist. "By thunder, I'll lose my temper! Get that gate open!"

"I'd rather not, sir. Maybe . . ."

St. John wheeled the scooter and roared back down the road. A few hundred feet away he stopped, turned, and sped back. He hit the bar at 120 miles an hour and splinters sang like hornets. He shot through and the scooter left the road, bounced, and turned over.

His head rang; for an instant he was back on the *Michelson-Morley* the time the meteor struck forward. Then he knew he was on his back on the ground, the scooter lying on him.

He heard another scooter drone to a stop. He got to his feet, his head clearing, and faced a tall, grizzled man in coveralls.

"What the devil are you up to, Hugo?"

"Commander Keefe. How'd you get out here?"

"Guard called me. You all right?"

Hugo felt himself, took a few steps. "Nothing broken. But I can't say the same for the scooter. Let me borrow yours, Pinky."

"Sure—to get back to town in."

"To go to Richmond in."

"Hu, that's crazy. What's been eating you the past two days since we got in?"

"Tell you tomorrow—just now I'm going to town." But Keefe's question had somehow crystallized his thoughts, conjured up a full, long answer.

"Going to town how? Hitch-hike?" Keefe's voice was sarcastic. Then it became persuasive. "You've got a gash on the arm, Hu. Let me bandage it and we can talk a little."

St. John sat on the overturned scooter; the Commander sat on a stone facing him. The guard had returned to the guardshack and they were alone.

"If you must know," said Hugo, "it's mostly Margie—began with her anyway. Now it's the whole way we live, the whole town and all of it. Phoneytown. It bugs me."

"Has Margie been overhauled lately?" Keefe paused in his bandaging.

"It's not that . . . she's in too good shape almost. As good as a

real woman, maybe better—but she isn't a real woman."

"Does that make any real difference?"

"It shouldn't but it does. My God, do you know what they do when we're away. They turn her off. *They turn off the machine!*"

"So?"

"So? They turn off the whole town; all the people, animals, everything! It isn't real, it isn't—human. How can I really love a wife that I know is a bunch of wires and plastic and transistors. She *acts* like she has feelings—happy to see me home, passionate, interested in books, in ideas—but are they *real* feelings?"

Keefe had finished with the arm. "It has to be that way," he said. "You know it. Ships like ours, like the *Michelson-Morley*, travel close to the speed of light. We were away six months on this last trip—maybe a couple of light years out. Six months to us, that is. On earth nearly fifty years rolled by. And . . ."

"That I know, that I know!" Hugo pointed back toward Pleasant Cove. "Does that justify a Phoneytown like they made for us to live in? The dogs bark and the children laugh and you can shoot the breeze with the butcher and none of it's real. The dogs and the kids and all the rest—wire and

sponge, plastic skin and nylon fur. Robot dogs, robot storekeeper, robot wives. All for us."

Keefe looked back toward the village, and somewhere they heard a dog barking. It sounded like a real dog. It may have been. The sound was lonely.

"It has to be this way and you know it. Your time-rate changes when you're moving; when you move as fast as we do, it changes a lot. Could you expect Margie, or any wife, to wait fifty years to see her husband? That's a third of a human lifespan. With an ordinary town we wouldn't know the place when we got back. When men come home, home means a place that's familiar."

"Home," said St. John bitterly. "Cardboard."

"In the past eight years of our time, yours and mine and the others, earth has grown nearly a thousand years older. Can you conceive what changes take place in a culture over a thousand years? Neither of us could get along with the real people outside the village. It might even be dangerous."

"How do you know?" Hugo flared. "Have you tried? Have any of us tried? Maybe it's just a story that they tell us. And by all that's holy, tonight I'm going into Richmond! I'm going to loaf around and just be human."

"Just before the guard called, Margie called, Hugo. She's pretty worried, more than she let you see."

"Does she *feel* worried—or *behave* worried? She's a pile of tin."

"Man, you'll make me tell you something I don't want to! Knock it off, now!"

Hugo stepped forward. "Let me by, Pinky. I'm moving."

"You're not." Keefe drew himself up, the starlight white on his crisp and grizzled hair. "I order you back to the village, captain! You're under arrest!"

For a split second Hugo stood immobile. Then his fist shot out. It thunked against Keefe's chin and the Commander staggered. Hugo let drive with the other fist and the Commander fell. A guard appeared, running.

Hugo dashed for the Commander's scooter, leaped in, touched tog, and zoomed across the field. In the distance he heard the guard yelling.

For half an hour he bumped along the fields, then took to the road. Nobody could legally stop him—Keefe's "under arrest" had been a bluff. Soon he was entering Richmond.

THERE were no scooter-parks anymore, so he left the scooter in an alley. In the streets

there were no wheeled vehicles of any kind. Pedestrians swarmed; in the middle of the street people loafed in chairs on a moving belt of what seemed pure blue light.

A girl came toward him through the air, standing on a round, railed platform. It dropped gently into a railed circular area and she joined the foot traffic. Nobody seemed to own the flying platform: a man stepped onto it and flew away.

Hugo entered a bar, brushing through a curtain of light. The place was jammed with tiny tables, and toward the rear the space was divided into small compartments by screens. He dropped onto a couch by a table and a waiter approached.

"Give me a beer."

The waiter's eyebrows went up. "A—what, sir?"

"Beer. A bottle of beer, if you have it."

The place did not have it. Neither did it have scotch, rye, rum or gin. He had a choice of two beverages—Martian schlonng, which he had sampled once and never would again—and glay. He ordered a glay.

Two tables away sat a big man and a spectacular blonde whose attention seemed to nibble at Hugo's table. At the next table to Hugo was a worn-looking man in a peaked cap, and near the screens



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sat a pair of Furred Vegans. There was nobody else except for whoever was in the screened rooms, where volumes of male and female laughter and other sounds were sporadically produced.

The blonde was wearing a short skirt. She twisted in her chair skillfully, and he could see it was a very short skirt.

His glay came. It was thick, milky-pink, and smelled. He sipped. It tasted like cabbage juice, saccharine, and mud.

"Is this all they have?" St. John asked the man in the peaked cap.

The man looked puzzled. "Why, that's all they have anywhere, along with glonng, and right here is the best in Richmond." He eyed St. John's uniform. "I guess that's all new to you, huh?"

"I guess so. What's the smell in here? Fumigating?"

"You don't like it?" Dislike edged the man's voice. "It's incense."

Hugo leaned back and sniffed deeply. It smelled like cabbage—old cabbage—mixed with a thin, acidic odor he couldn't identify. He sipped some glay and his stomach lurched. A quiet evening in a bar, he thought ironically; a little conversation and some fun.

The blonde was eyeing him again. Her big escort didn't seem to mind.

She let her hand rest on her thigh and smiled. Hugo turned away, faintly repulsed.

"Time for the bear race soon," said the man in the peaked cap.

"Yeah," said Hugo. He didn't feel like asking what the bear race was. Behind the screens a man's voice went "ooh—oh-oh—ooh," and there was giggling.

"What's with the screens?" asked Hugo.

"How do you mean, with 'em?" The man in the cap seemed annoyed.

"I mean—what goes on back there?"

"Oh. Private and semi-privates like in any bar; publics out on the floor here." His tone implied "you're awfully stupid, you annoying fellow."

"I see," said Hugo, not seeing. "How soon is the bear race?"

"Since you're one of them I guess is why you don't know. It's always at nineteen hours."

The blonde, facing him lifted a knee and tucked it under her chin. Her skirt fell back. Hugo turned to the man beside him.

"Nineteen hours, eh? Hope it doesn't rain."

The man glared at him as though the comment were highly insulting. Hugo, puzzled returned to his glay. A hand fell on his shoulder. It was the blonde's big escort.

"I think you owe my wife an apology, fella."

"Apology? I'm sorry—she was making all the advances."

The big man scowled. "Yeah. Ain't you got no respect for a lady?"

The blonde came over. "Easy, honey. Maybe he doesn't know much, being one of them and away and all."

"What the hell," growled the man. "Is he so far gone he's forgot common decency?"

Hugo rose. "It seems to me that's something *you've* forgotten! Why don't you buy your wife some underwear?"

"I oughtta smack you." The big man clenched his fist. "My wife ain't nothing to be ashamed of. You didn't even look at her; if you didn't want to join us you might have been decent about it."

It began to add up . . . what a "private" was, and a "public" . . . couches in the bar instead of chairs . . . the screened rooms. Hugo was not an inhibited man but he felt a little sick; for one thing, he was used to having the initiative himself where females were concerned; for another, he was used to a certain amount of privacy and subtlety.

And he felt all alone—there was nobody here who wasn't born and bred into this tangle of bad tastes,

bad smells and bad manners.

"Once upon a time I'd be asking you for an apology," said Hugo. "I suggest we both forget it."

"Forget it, my ear!" said the big man, and he lunged across the table.

Hugo stepped to one side and the big man went sprawling. Hugo swung the table up and crashed it down on him with the quick force that had served him against a myriad opponents on a thousand planets.

Outside a trumpet pealed and there were yells.

"The bear race!" shouted the man in the cap. "Come on! The bear race!"

The big man lumbered up from the floor and the blonde grabbed his arms.

"Honey, it's the August bear race. This liff is a garn—forget him!"

The big man stared wildly, torn two ways. He snatched a glass of clay, dashed it into Hugo's face, and hurtled out the door.

HUGO USED his handkerchief—the tablecloth was some kind of glass—to wipe the stuff out of his eyes and from his face and uniform. People were streaming from the screen-rooms, some buttoning clothes and a couple of girls not bothering, and rushing

outside. He followed.

The street was packed but down the middle it was clear and there were no passenger chairs. A spun wire fence made a 10-foot lane through the crowd. All eyes were toward the end of the street. People were getting swords from somewhere—Hugo saw that they were packed in vessels like the umbrella stands he had seen once in a museum.

"The August bear is about to be released," bayed a loudspeaker. "He is an American grizzly, weighing 450 pounds, from the Rocky Mountain ranches, and hates humans. It's 450 pounds of fighting bear, folks! He has been infected with non-virulent rabies—don't worry, you can't catch it—and boy is he mad! Are there any brave men in Richmond?"

"Yes!" yelled the crowd.

"Are there any bear-killers here tonight?"

"Yes!" yelled the crowd.

"The June bear and the July bear got away! Are you going to let this bear get away?"

"No!" yelled the crowd.

"This 450-pound giant has to run 15 blocks. If he makes it we cure him and patch him up and he gets a lifelong vacation in the Rockies. If one of you can jump in there and kill him, there's an expense-paid tour around the gal-

axy. A two-mouth tour for two, folks! Are you ready for Freddy?"

"Yes!" yelled the crowd.

Horns blared again and there was a commotion up the street. Hugo shouldered to the fence edge and leaned out, looking. Several blocks up, an enormous helicopter hovered. A metal ramp was let down, its lower end shoulder-height from the street, and a bay opened in the helicopter. The bear's head appeared, peering about nearsightedly.

"Send him down!" yelled the crowd.

The bear was trying to back up into the helicopter and was being forced out. His forequarters appeared—Hugo noticed his pelt was losing fur and looked mangy—then almost his whole torso. Long rods were being poked from within the craft.

The bear gazed downward and put a paw over his eyes almost humanly. A slender stick poked down and shoved him in the rump. There was a blue crackle of electricity, a wisp of smoke, and the bear leaped forward roaring.

The crowd howled.

The bear slid down the chute, claws screeching as he fought for purchase on the seamless metal. He dropped into the street and sat there stunned.

Somebody leaned over the fence

with a sword and slatted the bear on the shoulder. He turned his head and was slashed across the face. With a howl the grizzly lunged for the tormentor. It hit the fence and went rolling and scrambling backward, and Hugo realized the fence was electrified. There was general laughter.

Somebody tossed a handful of pellets to the ground behind the bear. They exploded with blue flashes and heavy violet smoke. The bear began running down the street, panting, open mouth white with froth and streaked with scarlet from the slash across the nose.

"He's on his way!" someone yelled.

A hand on the rubber-clad top rail of the fence, a boy vaulted into the bear's path. The bear lunged and the boy—Hugo judged him for a late teenager—skipped aside nimbly, jabbing at the hairy side and shoulder as the animal rushed past. The bear wheeled clumsily and came again, roaring.

The boy pranced skillfully around the bear, the sword flicking in, stabbing lightly, flicking back. The bear was becoming frenzied. People gasped as the youth dodged the huge swipes of the paws. Some cheered. Hugo was silent.

Suddenly the boy came to a dead stop. The bear eyed him as if trying to puzzle out this new

maneuver, and then, slowly, began to rise on its haunches. It was a slow, majestic process, the great bulk rising up, and up, and up, answering the great muscles, and finally the huge animal stood erect.

Slowly the wrestlerlike and enormous forearms spread and the bear shambling forward to take the motionless youth in a death-hug. The boy's swordpoint rose slowly.

In a complete hush a voice rang out. "One shot," yelled somebody. "You get one stab at him."

Suddenly the bear closed; the furred hulk sloped forward and the boy leaned to meet it. Rising to his tiptoes, half-turning, he darted the sword forward, his weight behind it. The bear's paw swung at the boy's head and caught the swordpoint and the sword slipped into the mangy hide of the shoulder, plowing a long gash. The boy dropped to the ground, rolled to the fence, and jumped over, the power apparently cut off to cover his retreat. People yelled derisively.

St. John was able to look away from the bear and at the people jammed around him. Their faces were strained with greed. He noticed the blonde and the big man. She said something to the man, and he answered something about ". . . thought so, too, but I guess I will get a lick in."

Then the man yelled. "Stir him up! Make him run! Give somebody else a chance at him!"

A policeman used an electric prod and the bear stopped licking his shoulder and started moving. Somebody turned a hose on him and the rabid animal went wild. The jaws snapped convulsively and strangled snarls came from the strained throat. The jaws seemed to lock momentarily. The bear leaped against the fence again and again, despite the electricity, but the fence held. Then it headed down the street at a dead run.

A wiry, monkey-faced man leaped the fence and stood in the street, and Hugo found himself vaulting over to stand beside him. Hugo grabbed the sword-arm.

"Enough torture!" he said, wrenching at the weapon. "Leave him alone now!"

A BALKED-ANIMAL roar guttered up from the crowd. A woman leaped into the street and began to pound Hugo on the back, timing her thumps to a sing-song "What do you think you're doing? What do you think you're doing?"

Hugo tried talking but he couldn't be heard in the tumult. Now the big man who had been with the blonde was in the street, his huge voice carrying. "I don't

care who this guy is, or what kind of a thing he is—let's get him!"

People were leaping the fence, dozens were slashing at the bear, dozens more were streaming toward Hugo. Suddenly he realized what he had got into. He stopped wrestling for the sword and began to run. The big man swung at him, glancing a blow off his temple, and Hugo's fist splatted into his nose. Hugo leaped to the fence-rail, leaned down, placed a hand on a surprised head and vaulted out into the crowd.

Before the people near him realized what was happening he pressed to the edge of the mob, got into the clear and began to run. He heard the draying of the big man and they were chasing him.

He might stop and either talk them down or fight. A glance back at the swords, the gaping noisy mouths, the twisted faces and glazed eyes, and the clamor of the big man—the point was settled. They had come for blood to begin with; now they wanted more than bear's blood.

The mob was growing. St. John saw an alley and ducked into it.

They followed.

In the dark he stumbled over something spongy—he never did learn what—and went down. The big man lunged at him with a sword, missing, the swordpoint

striking sparks from the pavement. Hugo rolled over, kicked him in the groin, snatched the sword and clouted him in the temple with the flat of it.

The big man grunted and fell. But the rest were seething into the alley, and he saw still others at the other end, behind him, and somebody driving a scooter toward him fast.

The scooter hood flipped back and a man threw something. It sailed over his head and exploded a few yards behind him. The world smelled like tangerines and Hugo staggered. Somebody grabbed him. He blacked out.

COOL AIR whipping his face, and his head jouncing, jouncing, and when his eyes opened there was the dark sky and the bright familiar stars, stars that he had spent his life hunting, some that he had already visited, some that he would visit sometime—maybe.

Maybe. He blinked, whisked star-thoughts out of his head. He was in a scooter, hood back, his head lolling on the sill, wind in his face. He wasn't tied or held.

He sat up. Commander Keefe was driving the scooter.

"Head clearing?"

"I guess. I guess I owe you thanks."

"Don't mention it—I tagged along just in case—as soon as I

felt up to it." Keefe rubbed his jaw where Hugo's fist had landed. "It was one of the grenade jiggers for Marsjungles, that I used back there, in case you didn't notice."

"Yeah."

They rode along in silence for awhile.

"Nobody followed me out of Richmond," said Keefe. "People don't drive out at night anymore—some kind of custom."

"I suppose."

"Customs do change, don't they?"

"Okay, Pinky, read the sermon. We don't fit into any world but the robot town, the phoneytown, and let this be a lesson to me."

"Hell's bells, Hu, it's true!"

"It's not. Those people in town—almost as alien as the things Out Yonder—but they *are* human, not watch-movements with humanoid skins."

"So?"

"I can't say I liked them. Sometimes they talked to me as though I was a thing myself, not a human. But they're my people, they're real. So I'm going back there."

"And Margie?"

"She'll go to Storage and they'll turn her off and pretty soon some rocketman will want a wife and they'll turn her on and push the Love Button. I hope he doesn't

want sons or daughters—that's one thing the Margies can't do for you."

"So that's what's been pinching."

"Partly."

They were coming into Pleasant Cove. "Be home soon," said Keefe.

"Home," said Hugo bitterly. "Home."

The word was a small, hard stone.

"Home is your own place, Pinky, your place to come home to—this isn't my home nor yours either. We're gone a few weeks and years pass, here, and they weather the paint on the houses just right, adjust the plants I planted in my garden, adjust and fake and store the wives and friends and pets so we can kid ourselves when we get back. I'd rather learn to live in Richmond, even though I'll have to leave the service."

Keefe grunted.

Then they stopped before Hugo's house, and Margie appeared at an upstairs window, the light behind, firing her golden hair.

Commander Keefe took a deep breath. "I said there was something I didn't want to tell you, but now I have to. You're the last of the crew to learn it. It's . . . well, look at your arm, where you cut it."

Hugo undid the bandage. "Bad gash that'll heal. So?"

"There's no blood, Hugo. You didn't bleed. Do you see what that means?"

It was clear enough; it was also too big to sink in. Hugo stared.

"The people back there talked as though you were a thing, you said. In a way you are. Except for a fistful of matter in your head, you're the same as Margie, and the butcher—and me."

Hugo stared.

Margie's voice came to them softly. "Come in, come in, I'll make coffee."

Hugo looked at Keefe.

"You volunteered for it, centuries ago, Hugo. We all did. The human body can't stand the kind of traveling we do, my friend. But most of what makes a person into a person is the stuff inside his head, and they kept that and threw the rest away, and if you want to talk about what's human and what isn't—well, the human part of you is just some brain tissue, well insulated, and the shape of the machine it directs."

St. John got his voice. "Volunteered, hell—I never did any such thing!"

"I can show you the records, Hu. But in your case, I guess a scalpel slipped when they were taking the stuffings out of your homegrown head and slapping them into the container you're wearing. A few

cells got lost, it seems—a few little scraps of memory.”

Margie had come down and was standing on the porch, her lace nightgown white like a bush of blossoms in the dusk. Her voice floated out to them. “Are you all right?”

Hugo didn’t answer. He was feeling of his body. He turned to Keefe. “Her, too?”

Keefe nodded. “Like us. Like you—except she remembers. She never told you.”

St. John sighed, looking at his hands.

“Hu?” floated Margie’s voice.

“Are you all right, honey?” She was walking across the lawn now.

“I can’t even go back to Richmond,” Hugo said to Keefe. “No place to go at all now.”

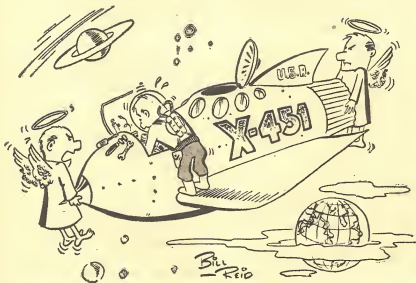
“You might,” said the Commander, “go home.”

“Home” said Hugo wonderingly. “Home.”

The word was a curious flower, just discovered.

He stepped out of the scooter and started across the lawn toward Margie.

“Sure I’m all right, honey,” he said. “We’re coming in for some coffee.”



“Step on it! We haven’t got all day.”

No disgrace could equal that of going over to the side of the enemy; Dirk couldn't believe that of his brother—that Carl had joined the—

TRAITOR LEGION

by

Robert Silverberg

DIRK SUMMERS STARED sickly at the sheaf of tridim photos in Space Secretary Hawthorne's hand. He licked his lips and, forcing words through a suddenly emotion-choked throat, said, "I can't believe my brother's deserted to the aliens. Let me see that picture again."

Hawthorne riffled through the sheaf and handed the tridim over. Dirk took it, nodding at the older man, and stared at it for almost a minute. Then he handed it back.

"It's Carl, all right. No doubt about it. Have you verified it?"

This would kill Dad if he ever found out, Dirk thought. Carl going over to the Silusians.

The Space Secretary's bowed head rose in affirmation. "Your brother was aboard Battle Cruiser XV106-41."

"That's right. Serving in the Seventh Octant. Carl was—is an

Astragation Tech first class. And you say—"

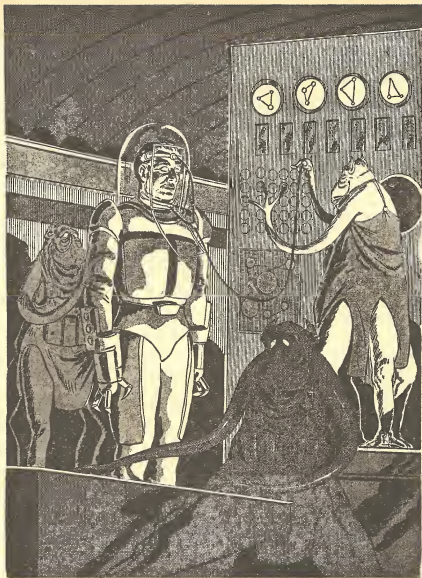
"I don't say it. The Silusians do. They captured XV106-41 during a skirmish last week—snared it in a gravdrag from a Silusian dreadnaught and brought it down on one of their artificial planetoids."

"How come that wasn't announced to the public?"

Hawthorne shrugged. "We don't necessarily announce all our losses, Mr. Summers. Sometimes, for tactical purposes, it becomes necessary—"

"Okay. Don't talk public relations at me, Secretary Hawthorne. I'm here to find out about my brother—and what I can do to get him out of where he is."

"That may prove difficult. His name and photo were transmitted today over the regular Silusian propagandabeam along with seventeen other members of the XV106-41's



crew."

"Can't you jam that damned thing?"

"We've tried," Hawthorne said. "There's no way of doing it. They've got some method of transmission that we haven't cracked yet—and so every day the Earth gets bathed with their filthy pro-Silusian propaganda. Our only weapon is to ask people not to listen to it—but you know they won't do that. They want to hear if their loved ones are safe."

"And they're finding out," Dirk said grimly. "You haven't notified my father of this, have you?"

"No. Commander Summers is gravely ill; we've taken the liberty of withholding official news of his son's defection until he's removed from the critical list. Of course, if he happened to have heard the propagandabeam—"

"He hasn't. I visited him this afternoon and he asked me how Carl was. That was three hours after the Silusian broadcast came through. He didn't hear about it."

"Are you sure? Maybe—"

"Maybe nothing. Look here, Hawthorne: my father's an old man. He raised both his sons in Space Corps traditions, and I think you know what that means. Carl made the Corps; I didn't. But we're both James Summers' sons. If Dad found out about Carl, it would kill

him in five minutes. I *know* it would."

"We'll see to it that no notification reaches him until you authorize it. Now, as to this mission of yours—"

"I understand perfectly well," Dirk said. "Since I'm not a member of the Space Corps, I'm technically a civilian and not an official member of any Terran military organization. I've volunteered to go behind Silusian lines strictly on my own hook, on a scouting mission that may or may not be a suicide job. But you know nothing about it, and as far as you know I stole a ship to get there. Right?"

"We're sorry it has to be that way," Hawthorne said, "but the Silusian propaganda is so damnable that we don't dare send spies behind their lines. They'd make so much of it if they caught you that it would hurt our cause tremendously."

Dirk rose. "Okay. Enough talking. I want to get going." His fists clenched and unclenched slowly. "I want to get up there—and I want to talk to my brother."

"Remember that the interests of all Earth are at stake, Mr. Summers—not just your own."

"I'll remember that. But remember that officially I'm going on my own interests, and not on Earth's. Now show me where this ship is

that I'm supposed to steal."

HAWTHORNE LED HIM down the long, brightly-lit hallway, into the luminous-walled dropshaft, down to the ground level, out onto the tightly-packed brown earth of the spacefield. About in mid-field stood the neat, compact bulk of an XL-832a two-man ship: a bright slim needle standing erect on its landing-jacks, poised, ready to throb into life and leap for the skies.

"There it is," Hawthorne said in a low murmur. "There's no one in the ship but the co-pilot, giving the instruments a final rundown. It's all yours."

"What about the guards?"

"There'll be two of them, but they know what they're to do. And the whole thing's being taken down on film-tape to beam to our allies, so make it convincing. They will."

"What if they make it *too* convincing?"

"We'll revive you and try it all over," Hawthorne said, allowing a faint smile to appear. He took Summers' hand. "Go ahead now. And—unofficially—good luck."

"Thanks," Summers said. "Thanks—unofficially."

He grinned at the cabinet member and turned away. Slowly he ambled out on the field to begin the little drama scheduled for now.

The ship was a beauty. It brought back all the old yearning for space he'd had until he'd been denied his commission. Since that fateful day Dirk had carefully repressed any longing to share his brother's life, had remained a groundman. Until today.

Now, with the tapering loveliness of the XL-832a gleaming before him like a seductive siren, Dirk felt the old desire come back. He began to run across the field toward the waiting ship.

"Hey! Where you goin', buster?"

He glanced over his shoulder. The guards were coming—one, two, dressed in the iron-gray of spaceport police. He hoped the cameras were grinding away for benefit of propaganda.

"No civilians are allowed on the field," one of the guards said. Dirk permitted them to overtake him.

"What do you think you're doing out here, civilian?"

"I'm planning on grabbing that ship," Dirk said loudly for the benefit of the audio pickups. This had to be staged well; in case he should fall into Silusian hands it would look bad for Earth without the evidence of this film.

"Oh, yeah?" The guards closed in. Dirk felt rough hands grab him, grip him tightly.

With a rapid spin he broke from their grasp, only to get a stunning

punch in his midsection from the bigger guard. Maybe these boys were only putting on a show, but they meant business all the same.

One of them went for his blaster—moving just a little slowly, for if he got it out the whole show would be over. Dirk leaped and slapped the blaster from his hand. Then the other man clubbed down on his neck, knocking him into the ground face first.

He rolled, spitting out dirt, and grabbed for the blaster. He got there a second ahead of the foot coming down, and yanked it away just before his fingers would have been trampled. One guard dove and landed on top of him; Dirk slid to one side, smashed a fist into the man's stomach, stood up, and gestured with the blaster.

"Get off the field or I'll vaporize you," he snapped. "I want that ship—and I'm taking it."

"You'll never get away with this, civilian."

"I'm doing a good job of it so far. Get moving."

The guards backed away off the field, and Dirk waited till they were approaching the concrete bordering apron before sprinting for the ship.

The co-pilot was inside, bent over the controls. Dirk didn't know if the cameras reached this far, but he wasn't taking any chances.

"Out of there," he ordered, waving the blaster. "I need your boat, fellow."

The spaceman made no answer but simply sprang from the pilot's seat, butting upward at Dirk. *They sure want to make this convincing*, he thought, grunting as the man rammed into him.

He was unable to fire the blaster in the close confines of the XL-832a's cabin, even had he wanted to. But he brought the butt down with numbing force on the man's head. The co-pilot swayed; Dirk grabbed him by the throat.

"The ship ready to run?"

"What do you care?"

"Answer me or I'll shove the blaster-butt down your throat," Dirk snapped. "Does she check out?"

"Yes," the co-pilot said. "But—"

"That's all I want to know. I'm blasting off, so get clear of my jets if you like to live."

He shoved the man through the open hatch of the cabin and yanked on the sealing-lever. The hatch clanged closed; the rear lock sealed itself. The little ship was ready for space.

Dirk glanced around at the control panel, letting the knowledge of his long-gone cadet days seep back into his mind. His fingers itched to grab the controls again, finally to pull back the accelera-

tion-control and spring from Earth's surface at last.

Nervously he set the ship up for blastoff. He had assured Hawthorne that he could still pilot a two-man spaceship, but now that he was actually in one he wasn't so sure. He'd forgotten more than he realized

But then he thought of his brother Carl somewhere out there on an alien planetoid, and confidence flowed back into him. Smiling coldly, he reached out and depressed the blasting stud.

The jets throbbed. Life poured into the ship. It roared a savage song as it sprang away from Earth and pierced the veil of atmosphere. The blackness of space was around Dirk Summers in a few moments. Ahead of him lay the Silusian network of defenses.

ALONE IN SPACE, with the darkness surrounding him, with the Silusian borders growing nearer, Dirk had some time to think.

Carl's a traitor to Earth.

That was the impossible thought that kept cropping up in his mind. Carl a traitor? How could that be?

He and Carl were only a year and a half apart in age; Dirk and his younger brother had almost been twins, doing everything together, going everywhere together

as if the difference in their ages had not mattered. Their father, Commander James Summers of the Space Corps, had raised them both with one goal in mind: the Corps

So when Dirk reached fifteen, he was entered in the Academy—and the following fall, Carl joined him there. The brothers led the school in everything, academically and athletically. Dirk was Number One in the Class of 2381; Carl led the Class of '82.

Then abruptly Dirk was expelled on a charge of cheating during an exam, five weeks before graduation. It hadn't been true; the whole thing was one of those monstrous mistakes of justice that strike men down when they least expect it. Dirk could have saved himself by speaking up at the right time—but that would have implicated others. He'd been taught by his father never to sacrifice others to save his own neck—and so meekly, he'd accepted the expulsion. Only two people knew the true story: his father and his brother. They believed him. There hadn't been much scandal; Dirk had returned to private life and found a job as an engineer.

Carl had gone on to graduate with honors the following year and had received a Space Corps commission, as an Astrogation Tech. He was assigned to duty in the

seemingly endless conflict with the alien invaders, the cold-blooded Silusians out of the Magellanic Clouds.

The chief action of the war was carried on in the void, far from either conflicting solar system. But a steady war of propaganda was carried on by both sides in an attempt to persuade other systems to enter on one side or the other. Both Terra and Silusia worked constantly to show their virtues and the evils of their enemies.

Lately Silusia was doing this by beaming reports of Earthmen who, upon capture, saw the light and deserted to the Silusian side, thereby proving to the neutral systems just how wonderful Silusia and its way of life was.

Several hundred Earthmen had supposedly deserted. Dirk hadn't believed a word of the stories he heard—until his brother's face was flashed on the screen as being among the latest batch of deserters.

It couldn't be true. Carl wouldn't do a thing like that. Carl *couldn't*.

But if it *were* true—

Dirk had made up his mind in an instant, flown to the capital after a visit to his ailing father, and explained his plan. He would go behind Silusian lines on a spying mission, strictly on his own hook, and see for himself whether

these Earthmen actually were deserting.

He hoped it was just a Silusian lie. He didn't want to come face-to-face with his brother and find out that—

No. It was impossible.

Grimly he stared through the plastex viewscreen at the bright-dotted blackness before him. Space was vast; the XL-832a was tiny. It shouldn't be hard for him to slip through the alien lines and land on the artificial planetoid where his brother supposedly was.

It was strange, he thought. He'd dreamed for years of crossing the great void of space. But he had never imagined his first crossing would be made on a mission of this sort.

Stars leaped by. Dirk Summers fought down his impatience and waited for Silusian territory to draw near.

His hands gripped the controls tightly. He waited.

IN THE VIEWSCREEN he saw a dull iron-gray ball revolving slowly at a distance of fifty-seven million miles. His mass detectors told him all he wanted to know: this was the Silusian prison planetoid. This was where the captive Earthmen were living, the supposed renegades.

The planetoid was streaked with

wide seams and vast rivets. It was a huge metal globe here in emptiness between the Magellanic Clouds and Earth's galaxy. And within it somewhere was Carl Summers. Dirk began to compute a landing orbit.

The area around the planetoid was dotted with the bright lights of detector grids—but any shrewd spaceman could weave an XL-832a past them, even Dirk whose knowledge to date was only theoretical. He shifted into Deception Pattern 116 and began to slide through the network of grids. Below, on the planetoid, he picked out an entrance port and set his orbit accordingly.

He attached the minicamera to his forehead; the subminiaturized camera would record anything he saw as evidence to be used in the campaign against the Silusians. Methodically he prepared himself for the landing, checking off deceleration controls, donning his spacesuit, waiting, waiting.

The bright swirl of a detector grid loomed up ahead. He maneuvered, dodged past it, and shot down toward the Silusian base.

It was a perfect landing. The XL-832a touched down lightly on the planetoid's skin; within moments, Dirk was out of his ship and running over the thick metal hide of the alien base toward the yawning entrance-hatch ahead.

He reached the hatch and activated the minicamera. From here on he'd be recording evidence.

The hatch loomed open before him.

Inside he found himself in a wide, brightly-lit corridor. He backed against the coolness of one wall and crouched in an inset alcove until he could get his bearings. In the distance, he saw a pair of Silusian guards pacing back and forth.

He stiffened at the sight of them. They were even more repulsive, if possible, than the Terran propaganda releases had painted them. Dead blue in color, with three bulging red lidless eyes set in their squarish heads, they seemed vaguely reptilian, and totally alien. Dirk crouched back in the shadows as they marched up and down.

He glanced the other way. Five men in spacesuits were coming. Five Terrans.

Coldly he peered at them, tried to see behind their face-masks. None of them looked familiar enough to be his brother, but on the other hand he was sure he had seen those five faces somewhere before.

Yes. He had.

On the sheaf of tridim photos Secretary Hawthorne had given him.

Coming toward him were five of

the most recent batch of converts to the Silusian cause, if he were to believe the propagandabeam.

There was no time like now to find out. He stepped out of the shadows just as the group caught up with him.

"Hello, Summers," one of the men said—a craggy-faced Jetman, First Class. "We were just looking for you."

Being called by name rocked him for an instant, until he realized they probably mistook him for Carl. It was a lucky break that they were so similar in facial appearance.

"I was . . . busy," he said indistinctly. "What's up?"

"Nothing too much. We've heard the gravdrag's caught another ship—the XV106-53. Crew of twenty-three being brought down here for indoctrination."

"Really? Where'd you hear that?" Dirk asked.

"General Holk-forgan told us. You must have missed the briefing session, Carl."

"That's funny," said another. "I coulda sworn you were there, Summers."

"Must have been my twin," Dirk muttered.

"You missed a lot of stuff, then," the first man said. "The tests on us came out okay. That means we're going to be put on battle

duty soon. I can't wait to get out there and start pouring energy at those Terran ships."

"Neither can I," Summers said. Then he went stiff. *Can't wait? Terran ships?*

It was true, then. These men had changed colors, had switched to the enemy side—and were itching for battle! They couldn't wait to get out and start firing at their former comrades!

It was incredible. *And Carl's one of them*, Dirk thought hollowly.

"Hey, look who's coming," the big jetman remarked suddenly.

Dirk turned and saw another space-suited figure proceeding toward them along the corridor. He paled.

"It's Carl, ain't it?" someone said. "But if *that's* Carl—who the hell is this guy?"

DIRK DIDN'T WAIT for the question to be answered. As soon as he could plainly see that the man drawing near them was indeed his brother, he turned to run.

The big jetman grabbed him as he went past. Dirk wrenched his hand free, drove a spacesuited glove into the man's middle, and ran for it.

He dashed down the long corridor as far as he could go without encountering any opposition. Then, reaching the end of the corridor,

he turned the corner and saw several heavily-armed blue-skinned aliens advancing toward him, followed by a number of men in spacesuits—more of the Terran deserters, evidently.

He looked back. Six figures were pursuing him—one of them his own brother.

He edged against the wall, found a door, pushed it open. Better an uncertain refuge than certain capture, he thought.

The room he entered was some sort of laboratory. It was a vast oval with high luminescent ceiling and walls, and at one end was a complex network of machinery whose function Dirk was completely unable to determine. It didn't matter. He had to hide.

He slipped into a closet, leaving it slightly ajar, and waited there. Outside, in the hall, there was the steady sound of booted feet.

After a few moments he saw the door to the lab slide open. He poised tensely, ready to come out with fists flying in case they discovered him.

Four of the aliens entered the room. At close range they were almost unbearably hideous; Summers shuddered at the sight. But his face grew stony as he saw who else was entering the room: a long line of Terrans.

Deserters.

He looked for his brother as they filed past him, but Carl was not here. None of the faces looked familiar, in fact; searching his memory, he tried to reconstruct the looks of the men on those trim photos, but the faces his mind brought up did not jibe with the ones before him.

They were all in the room now—more than twenty of them. And, he saw, they weren't looking for him at all. They had Silusian guns trained on them, and they were standing packed together uneasily. These weren't traitors, Dirk realized.

They were the twenty-three captives taken from the new ship. And something was going to be done to them—something that involved the machine at the far end of the room.

Chilled, he watched the Silusians go to work.

TWENTY-THREE MEN DIED in five minutes. Unable to move, realizing it was sure death to venture out of hiding, Dirk was compelled to stand by while three of the Silusians moved rapidly down the Terran ranks, removing facemasks, while the fourth kept his heavy-cycle blaster trained on the group.

They dropped one by one as their suit air rushed out and was

replaced with the oxygenless atmosphere of the Silusian planetoid. Dirk gasped; he fought back the temptation to rush from the closet and take as many Silusians with him as he could before that heavy-cycle job ashed him.

But he stayed, and his camera recorded it all. He knew he was more valuable to Earth in hiding here, even though twenty-three men were being murdered before his eyes.

But the real horror was yet to come.

After all twenty-three lay in stiffening postures on the metal floor, the four Silusians moved efficiently among them, dragging the bodies toward the machine at the back of the lab.

He watched as the aliens drew gleaming electrodes from the body of the machine and, reaching in the open facemasks, attached them to the heads of the dead Terrans.

When the job was done, the leader of the four aliens reached high above his head and yanked down on a switch. Dials spun crazily on the face of the machine, recording the power flow. Bright electric arcs hummed and crackled about the spacesuits of the dead Terrans.

And then they began to rise and do a crazy dance.

Dirk's stomach turned to lead

and sank as he stared. The dead men were moving awkwardly about like so many puppets at the ends of their electrodes, while power throbbed in the machine.

No. Not puppets, he thought coldly.

Zombies.

It went on for three minutes; then the alien cut the switch and the power died. The Terrans removed the electrodes of their own accord and closed their facemasks.

"Welcome to the ranks of the Silusian Army," the alien said in faultless Terran. "I am General Holk-forgan of His Imperial Majesty's Army. I will be in charge of your indoctrination."

Dirk felt cold sweat pouring down his face. Not even the most persuasive Terran propaganda had led him to think the Silusians were capable of *this*.

They were coldly killing prisoners-of-war and then—through some weird process of their alien science—bringing them back to life as loyal vassals of Silusia, with all their previous habits and beliefs left untouched. It was virtually fool-proof; in case any of the "converted" Terrans were recaptured, there would probably be no way of detecting the alteration.

But the evidence was down on the tiny retina of Dirk's minicam. He knew if he could only escape

from the planetoid and return to Earth with it the Silusian propaganda barrage would be punctured for good.

Mingled with his horror was a sort of relief. Carl was not a traitor. The Carl he knew was dead; the thing that wore his body was no traitor, for it had never known allegiance to Terra. He knew that both he and his father would be happier knowing Carl was dead than that a Summers had been a traitor to Earth.

General Holk-forgan was finishing his speech to the "recruits" now. He was telling them to wander around, to investigate the planetoid for the rest of the day, to get used to their new home.

The group broke up. As they left the lab, Dirk casually slipped from the closet and entered their midst. No one would notice an extra space-suit in a group of more than twenty.

IT WAS STRANGE, walking in a group of these zombies. They said little. As the group came out into the corridor, Dirk noticed a few other Terrans join them.

"We're previous recruits," they announced. Dirk saw that his brother was among them, and turned away so his facemask would be averted. He didn't want to be spotted. "We've come to show you

around," Carl told them.

"What are these Silusians like?" one of the new "converts" asked.

"They're fine men. All you heard about them on Earth was just lies—"

"We knew that all along!"

"Good. Anyone could see that they're just as human as we are, that they want to live in peace with Earth but that the warmongers and fools down there insist on killing and murdering instead of negotiating."

Dirk listened to the stream of lies pouring from his brother's lips with a dull horror. He had to keep reminding himself that this wasn't Carl, that it was only some alien puppet speaking.

But it was all down on the camera, sight and sound. What he had would be dynamite; the entire galaxy would explode in rage when Terra beamed Dirk's film to them.

He edged to the front of the group. They were coming close to a fork in the corridor which Dirk recognized as the way to the escape-hatch through which he had entered. His spaceship was waiting for him outside. Satisfied, he dropped back and let the others pass him. Now that he knew where he was, all he had to do was wait until he was behind the others, then make a dash for the hatch. They wouldn't notice him until he was

gone.

He glanced warily back. There was no one behind him.

Now!

He cut off to the side and leaped for the catwalk that led to the hatch. But as he did so he felt something tug on his boot, and a voice said, "Not so fast, friend. Where do you think you're going?"

He looked down. One of the zombies had grabbed his foot and was tugging. Dirk kicked, but it was no use; he was yanked down.

He landed lightly and confronted the man who had spotted him. Behind the other's face-mask was—Carl.

"I thought it was you," Carl said coldly. "Jaggers said there was a double of me running around here a while ago—and it could only be you. What were you doing up on that catwalk, Dirk?"

Numbly Dirk stared at his brother, unable to speak.

"Don't tell me your indoctrination didn't take," Carl said. "I thought it worked every time."

"I'm not indoctrinated, Carl. Get out of my way and let me get out of here."

Carl grinned. It was a chilling sight to see his kid brother's familiar grin coming from this alien thing. "You weren't indoctrinated? How sad, Dirk. But let me take you to General Holk—"

Carl reached for him. Dirk slapped the hand away. There were just the two of them, alone in the corridor, brother against brother—human against *thing*.

Carl's mailed fist crashed into his stomach, and Dirk gagged. The two of them had been just about even in strength since their teens, but Dirk had had the faintest edge because of his age. Only now he was fighting — this.

Carl drove him back; Dirk defended himself desperately. To his horror he saw Carl's object was to smash his faceplate. Dirk clamped his teeth together and batted away Carl's blows.

"I'm your *brother*, Carl," he gritted. "Or don't you remember?"

"My brother, Earthman? Maybe —once. But not any more."

Carl accompanied his taunting words with a barrage of blows that left Dirk reeling. Dirk still found it difficult to understand that he was fighting for his life—and against his own brother. His brother.

How can I kill my own brother? he asked himself.

As Carl's fists grazed his faceplate he realized that Carl himself had given him the answer a moment before. They were no longer brothers. And the Carl of old would have been the first to applaud what he was going to do.

Grimly he drew close to Carl, fighting with desperate force. *This is for Carl*, he thought. *The Carl I grew up with. And for Dad. And for all of Earth.*

His fists hammered mercilessly at the thing before him. He drove the creature that had been Carl back, back—finally smashed him to the ground with a fierce blow. Carl began to rise, but Dirk was on him in an instant, pinning him with a knee in his chest.

He brought his glove down backhanded across Carl's faceplate and the air came rushing out. Dirk looked away; it wasn't pleasant to see a man die this way. Even Carl.

When it was over, he heaved the body over his shoulder and started to climb the catwalk. No one had heard the sound of the struggle; he emerged unopposed on the skin of the planetoid.

There was his ship, still untouched. He ran toward it as quickly as he could, with the corpse

slung over his shoulder.

It would have been foolish to leave Carl there. The aliens would only have put him back through the machine and revived him again. No; Carl was dead—the Carl he knew—and Carl was to get a decent burial.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, the XL832a hovered for an instant over the surface of the planetoid. At the controls of the ship, Dirk kept the blast on high, until the cremation was over. Carl's ashes would drift out through the entire galaxy—a hero's burial.

Then he set the course for Earth. With the minicamera safely aboard, he'd have enough evidence to damn the Silusians in the eyes of the galaxy forever. And proof that Carl had been loyal to Earth to his dying breath. Dirk Summers relaxed inside the tiny ship, knowing that his father, the old Commander, could be proud of both his sons.

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Lefty Baker's Nuthouse

by

Rog Phillips

Lefty Baker was put away for a rest cure; but this joint was nuttier than the proverbial fruit cake. Even the doctors were patients! . . .

“LEFTY BAKER,” I said to myself as the bus turned off the highway onto the fresh blacktop roadway of the brand new Mable Farnsworth Memorial State Hospital, “If you can refrain from talking to mad scientists, insane robots, invisible scientists from Venus, and such, maybe you will get a break here.”

I was being transferred, along with a few busloads of other inmates, to this newly constructed state hospital, built by a grant donated to the state by some millionaire in memory of his aunt Mable, to relieve crowded conditions at the other mental hospitals throughout the state. And as the bus I was in stopped at the entrance to the brand new administration building, and I looked over the acres of freshly sprouted lawn and the dozens of artistically distributed flower bed spots with no plants in them yet, I felt homesick

already for the old place where the heaviest work I had to do was pull a weed shoot that had sprouted since yesterday or the day before.

I am no more crazy than John Foster Dulles. My trouble is bad luck brought about by listening to other people's problems which seem entirely reasonable but have a way of building up to something that, when I am left holding the bag and trying to explain, causes lifted eyebrows, at best. You think there aren't plenty of people as sane as me in the state hospitals? Go visit one and find out. On second thought, don't. You might not get away.

The guards got us out of the bus and into single file. Inside the administration building all was glistening marble, fresh plaster, and the smell of fresh paint. The line ahead of me went to a desk in the middle of an acre of marble



floor, and from there to three separate groups that would be taken to different wards.

The girl at the desk would have won the Miss Universe contest

even with a wart on her nose, she was that beautiful, and she didn't have a wart on her nose. Beside her stood a man in a white jacket who looked a little like Charles

Boyer. I felt jealous of him, standing so close to her, and while the line moved slowly forward I watched her, building dreams of her being in some sort of troubles I could rescue her from. Then, suddenly, it was my turn.

The smile she gave me made my heart thump. She said, "I am Nurse Genevieve White, and this is Dr. Claude Parker. You are?"

"Gregory Baker," I said, "But everyone calls me Lefty."

"Oh yes," Genevieve said, and she said it as though she had heard about me. Her eyes, large and blue, studied me with more than casual interest for a brief second.

"Oh yes," Dr. Parker said, nodding and compressing his lips.

Then, somehow, I was in one of the three groups, and shortly we were being processed into Ward C, which is one of the trusty wards, so I knew that I would soon be planting geraniums in those dozens of empty flower beds.

There was already quite a few guys in the ward, probably from other state hospitals than the one I had come from. I ignored them and went over to a window and looked, admiring the new lawns, picturing how the flower beds would look.

A voice at my elbow caused me to turn around. The guy who stood beside me was about five feet five,

not very husky, but the kind that looks like he can take care of himself in a fight, and has plenty of times. Gray eyes, a nose that got bent over years ago and stayed that way, one cauliflower ear. I guessed him to be in his late fifties. And since he could not be a mad scientist or a robot by any stretch of imagination, I grinned at him, and we got acquainted. He was, he said, Fred Mayhem. And he was, he said, a retired detective.

"A detective?" I echoed. "Retired?"

He grinned wryly. "Not by choice though. I just — well, I got sapped a few times too many in my time, and it sort of got my brains mixed up a little. Not much," he hastened to add, "But, well, at times I guess I'm not all here."

"You seem all right to me, Fred," I encouraged.

"Oh, I have all my marbles," he said modestly. "It's just that . . ." He looked sharply behind him and to the right and the left, then took my arm and pulled me closer to him, and whispered, "Did you know there's something strange going on around here?"

"No!" I whispered back, looking at him with wide eyes to keep him happy.

He nodded mysteriously and looked again to make sure no one else was listening. "Yes. Very

queer. When they built this place they didn't build any residence houses for the staff! What do you make of that?" He blinked at me shrewdly, and looked cautiously around again, then pulled me even closer and whispered, "I *think* I know why, too. I won't tell you right now. You'd think I'm crazy. You find out for yourself first that I'm right. They didn't build any houses for the doctors. Why?"

We looked at each other seriously. "Why?" I whispered.

"*You find out.*" he whispered. "While you're at it, keep your eye on the Ward J building."

"Why the Ward J building?" I asked.

"Just watch the Ward J building," he whispered. He jerked his head about once again in a hasty survey, then planted his lips right in my ear and whispered, "That's where the whole staff, doctors, nurses, interns and guards, are being *kept prisoner!*"

He let go of me and stepped back, giving me a sharp, knowing look. "See you later," he said crisply, and hurried away.

YOU SEE WHAT I mean? There must be something about me that attracts mad scientists, insane robots — and now an ex-detective with scrambled brains — to me. Sure, I said, "Oh, no!

Not again!", and tried to keep away from him. But he had adopted me as his deputy or Dr. Watson or whatever, and he kept after me.

At four-thirty in the afternoon he dragged me over to a window with a great show of secrecy and pointed out the J building, and made me stay there while I watched a procession of doctors, nurses, guards, and whatnot come out of that J building and go to the various other buildings. Then, a little before five, I saw the dayshift staff leave the various buildings and go to the J building. Among them I saw nurse Genevieve White, so I was happy — until she went into that J building.

One thing seemed certain. If they were being held prisoner in the J building it was of their own free will. Just the same, knowing that Genevieve was there kept me studying the place, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through one of the windows, or see her come out again.

Like all the other buildings, it was brand new. From what I could see it seemed empty. No faces appeared in any of the windows on the first, second, and third floors. I couldn't see the basement windows because they were sunk in window wells below ground level.

After that change of shifts I didn't see anyone enter or leave the J building. I began to see why Fred Mayhem thought they were

being held prisoner in there. But of course they weren't, I felt sure.

The houses would be built later, I felt sure. Meanwhile they must have fixed the J building into a sort of dorm for the staff to live in. I pointed this out to Fred.

Fred shook his head emphatically. "Why haven't they laid the foundations for houses then?" he countered. "And why are all the floors of the building vacant, and the windows to the basement rooms painted over *on the outside*?" He jerked his head this way and that to make sure no one was snooping, and said, leaning close to my ear, "To keep those *on the inside* from scraping it off and signaling for help. That's why." He looked past my shoulder and said, "So I says to her, I says . . ."

A voice behind me said, "Time to wash up for dinner, boys." It was one of the husky male nurses in charge of Ward C. I looked at him, wanting to ask him what was what with the Ward J building. I hesitated too long. He walked on past Fred and me. Afterward I decided it was just as well. Nothing could be wrong. I'd just keep away from Fred Mayhem and forget about it.

The next morning trucks started arriving, loaded with flats of geraniums and other plants, and all of us in Ward C were herded out onto the grounds to begin transplant-

ing them into the beds.

I had made up my mind not to think about it, but I found myself searching across the grounds for a stretch of road with a double row of concrete foundations for houses for the doctors. I was sure I would find it, then I could point it out to Fred Mayhem and get his mind off his screwy idea.

I didn't find it though, and by afternoon when we had worked around to a spot where there was a closer view of the Ward J building, I was annoyed at myself because I couldn't keep from studying the J building. From a little knoll, finally, I was able to see the tops of some of the basement windows.

Fred had come up behind me, and I jumped when he whispered in my ear, "See? Windows painted over just like I told you."

It was true. Or at least it looked like it.

I got down on my hands and knees and went back to work. Fred worked beside me and kept whispering. "We've got to get over there some way," he said.

I didn't answer him.

About a half hour later the dayshift staff started coming out of buildings and heading toward J building. I would have missed what happened if Fred hadn't jabbed his elbow into my ribs and pointed.

There was this small group of doctors and nurses going toward

J building, when suddenly this one male nurse starts to run. I just got a glimpse of his face and recognized him as one of the male nurses I had seen the afternoon before, from the Wards M to P building. A doctor took after him, and he turned and slugged the doctor and started running again toward the trees that marked the west boundary of the hospital grounds.

The rest of the male nurses and doctors were running after him by then, and they brought him down by sheer weight of numbers before he got to the trees. There was a lot of threshing around, and I knew the guy was putting up a struggle. Then suddenly he wasn't struggling any more, but walking back with the others, laughing and talking as though nothing had happened.

"See what I told you?" Fred Mayhem hissed. "He tried to escape!"

I STILL didn't want anything to do with it, but in spite of myself I was hooked. Fred Mayhem kept hissing, "We got to get down a window well and scrape a little paint and peek inside." At first I ignored him, then, as the day wore on, I found myself nodding in agreement. Only it was going to be me that took the peek. I wasn't going to take his word

for anything.

It wasn't until two days later, close to quitting time, that the opportunity came. Fred and I worked together on the beds near the J building, and suddenly we saw the guards move out of sight around the building. The next minute I had run to the nearest window well and dropped down, landing with almost no sound.

I looked up and saw Fred Mayhem's face. He handed down a mulching tool. I took it. Very cautiously I reached the tool through the bars and scraped at the green paint on the glass.

I pulled the tool out from between the bars and leaned forward to peek inside — and there was an eye at the hole looking out at me!

It was a blue eye with dark brown eyelash and smooth skin. I thought I recognized it. My heart was pounding so violently it hurt my ribs. It wasn't going to do me any good just to look back at an eye though, so I motioned for whoever it was to move back so I could peek in.

The eye moved away. I pressed my head between the bars until they pressed like a vise, in order to get my eye as close to the window as possible. Finally I could see inside.

What I saw was impossible. I saw Genevieve. I saw some other girls I recognized as nurses. They

were all looking at me excitedly, their lips moving.

I concentrated on Genevieve's lips. They formed words with exaggerated lip movements. "Help. We are being held prisoner. Get the police." She repeated it several times.

I looked at her and the others. They all wore gray inmate dresses with MABLE FARNSWORTH MEMORIAL HOSPITAL etched on them in bleached letters. The room they were in had a closed door with a heavy glass observation window in it. There were bunks welded to the wall.

I drew back from the window and examined the bars. They were plenty solid. Genevieve's eye was back at the peephole again watching me. I formed words with my lips, saying, "I will think of something and be back." Her eye moved up and down. She was nodding.

I grinned and blew her a kiss, then leaped up. Fred Mayhem caught my hands and pulled me out of the window well. We went back to work, and just in time. Seconds later the guards came along to see how we were doing.

Fred was quivering like a terrier to learn what I had seen. As soon as the guards left I told him, and his gray eyes were lit up like neons at this confirmation of his deductions.

"The police are out," he said.

"We'll have to get hacksaws and saw the bars."

"Why?" I whispered back. "We can rescue Genevieve when she's on duty."

He shook his head. "You've missed the vital point," he hissed. "Who's holding them prisoner? They're holding *themselves* prisoner! That means she won't let you rescue her while she's on duty. We'll have to saw through the bars."

"But why would they hold themselves prisoner?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he snapped. "The evidence says so. I'm a detective. I go by the evidence."

"Then let's rescue her from herself," I said, humoring him. "That's easier — maybe — than stealing a hacksaw and sawing through these bars."

He went away by himself, grumbling, glaring at me once in a while. Finally he worked his way back to me and whispered, "Maybe you've got something. We'll need a car though."

I agreed that we would, and more than our share of luck.

GETTING A CAR was going to prove difficult. Fred Mayhem and I haunted the flower beds near the parking area as much as possible during the days that followed.

No luck. And it was a wonder we didn't get caught and have

our ground freedom revoked. I was continually amazed that no one suspected just by looking at Fred. With a plan of action, he became a super sleuth of the Mack Sennett variety, a legal eagle, a bent nosed hawk, darting from geranium bed to freshly parked car with darting movements and head jerks that gave him full circle vision every three seconds.

Then, suddenly, one day, there it was. A car with the keys in it and the motor idling, and no one in sight. Fred motioned me over. I gulped and stood very quiet for a moment, realizing with a sense of dread that The Time had come.

"There's no time to waste!" Fred Mayhem hissed. "Go in and get her."

I took a deep breath. Suddenly I was calm.

I had a little weeding tool in my hand, very harmless looking in its proper place, but very ugly looking as a weapon if someone wanted to use it as one. I palmed it so that the handle was concealed up my sleeve, and walked with normal slowness to the steps to the entrance to the administration building. I knew I would have to hurry because no one left his motor running unless he expected to be back in a few minutes.

As I entered Genevieve glanced up from some papers she was reading. She smiled, then frowned ques-

tioningly. I grinned and went straight toward her desk. Suddenly her face lit up with recognition.

"Oh," she said, "You're Lefty. haven't seen you since you came here. How do you like your new home?"

"You haven't seen me since the day I arrived?" I asked her.

"Why, no, Lefty," she said. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Skip it," I said. "It doesn't matter. Someone outside told me to come in and get you right away. I didn't get his name. He's in a car and can't come in. And he's in a hurry."

"I'll send someone," she said. "I can't leave the desk."

"It will only take a minute," I said. "He said it's very important, and he asked for you."

"Well. . ." she hesitated.

"Just out in the parking area," I said.

She stood up and came around the desk. "Do you like it here?" she asked conversationally as she fell into step beside me.

"Oh, it's all right," I said, holding the door open for her. Out on the steps I pointed toward the car. The back of Fred's head was visible, in the driver's position. A thin cloud of exhaust fumes spurting from the tailpipe convinced her completely.

She hurried, with me beside her. The way the parking area curved,

by the time we were near the car no one watching from the first floor windows of the administration building could see anything of us but our heads.

I steered her around to the passenger side of the car. When we reached the door she bent down and looked in. "Why, it's Fred Mayhem!" she gasped, the first signs of alarm creeping into her voice.

There is an advantage to being a patient in a mental hospital. I showed her the vicious looking prongs of the garden tool in my hand and grinned at her.

"Just get in the car and be quiet," I said, "Or I'll use this to claw the skin off your face." I wouldn't have hurt her for anything, but she couldn't know that. She almost fainted.

"Get her in the car!" Fred Mayhem hissed.

I opened the back door of the car and shoved her in, getting in beside her.

"Quiet!" I hissed at her, holding the claws of the garden tool inches from her face, and keeping her down low in the seat.

Fred Mayhem slipped the car into gear and backed out of the parking spot. Just as he shifted gears and started forward there was a shout, and a man ran toward the car waving his arms.

"The owner!" Fred hissed, and

headed straight toward him.

The man leaped frantically out of the way. With a clash of gears and a roaring motor Fred Mayhem hurtled toward the exit.

Genevieve took advantage of my interest in what was going on and grabbed the weeding tool, and started screaming at the top of her voice. We wrestled for possession of the weeding tool, and at the same time she tried to get the door next to her open.

We were picking up speed and approaching the gates rapidly. The guard rushed out and tried to get the gates closed. They were of heavy steel bars, and would have effectively stopped us, but we got through with inches to spare.

THE DIE WAS CAST now. As Fred Mayhem sent the car hurtling down the highway, while I fought with a screaming clawing very beautiful and very disheveled Genevieve for possession of the claw-toothed garden tool, I thought with some bitterness of other times when I had been in situations whose explanations would be impossible for anyone in their right mind to believe. But — Brother! They had been sensible and mild compared to this!

In a few minutes at most police cars would be zeroing in from every direction, setting up road blocks, ready to shoot to kill, believing

they were after two dangerous lunatics.

And what could we say by way of explanation of our actions, Fred and I? I could just see it! *But officer, no kidding, the staff at the hospital is holding itself prisoner in the Ward J building except during working hours, and while this girl was being held prisoner she definitely asked me to rescue her, no matter what she says to the contrary.*

Ha!

The way Genevieve kept fighting me, something was definitely wrong with our figuring. I sensed it but I didn't want to believe it.

I said, "You don't need to fight any more, Genevieve. We're away from the hospital now. You're safe."

She redoubled her efforts to get the tool away from me. This wasn't the girl who had asked me to rescue her. This was a girl who would rather die than be rescued.

Suddenly I got mad. I shoved her away from me and shouted, "Shut up and quiet down a minute while I explain something."

She stayed there on the far corner of the seat, watching me with terror in her big blue eyes.

"Maybe I'm crazy," I said. "I don't know. All I know is that I saw you through a basement window in J building and you asked me to get the police, save you.

That's what I'm doing. I don't know what it's about but I'm going to find out before I'm through."

Her eyes went very wide and her lips formed a silent "Oh!" She looked thoughtful for a moment, then she laughed nervously and straightened up.

"Oh yes!" she said. "I remember now, Lefty. I didn't know it was you." She put an expression of contriteness on her beautiful face. "I'm sorry, Lefty. Some of us girls were playing a trick on you. You see —" She flashed me a warm smile. "We are engaged in some experiments over in J building. We are living there under the same conditions the patients live under so we can understand them better."

We were thrown forward, half off the seat, as Fred braked abruptly and turned onto a cross highway with tires screaming. He was hunched over the wheel like a bird of prey.

When the car straightened out Genevieve leaned toward me, resting her hand on my knee. "I'm sorry, Lefty. All this trouble you two have gotten into because you misunderstood. Don't you see? It's all so simple. This is a new hospital and we are a new staff, and when we are off duty we live under the same conditions as the patients so we can compare notes and learn what to do to make them

well again. We want to be the best hospital in the country. Turn around and take me back. I'll explain to Dr. Parker how you two thought you were helping me, and I'm sure everything will be all right."

The car began to slow down. I looked up front at Fred Mayhem. He was hunched even more over the wheel, no longer like a bird of prey but like a pathetic old man.

"It's all my fault," he said. "I knew my brains were scrambled. That's why I'm in the hospital."

"It will be all right, Mr. Mayhem," Genevieve soothed, patting his shoulder. "Turn the car around and go back now."

His head bobbed up and down in a nod. The gears clashed as he started up.

"Wait!" I said.

Genevieve looked sharply at me, then smiled. "Please?" she said, leaning forward with her hand on my arm. "I — I like you very much, Lefty. Remember when you first came? I noticed you right away. I've thought about you a lot since then. Maybe if I talk to Dr. Parker about it we can have dates once in a while, go to a show in town and eat in a restaurant, and maybe even—" She slid over on the seat until she was close beside me, her face close to mine.

"We'd better hurry back now,

before the police start looking for us," she said. "That would be bad."

"There's no hurry," I said.

"Oh but there is —" She bit her lip, then smiled again. "Don't you see, dear? If the police catch you and Fred, then nothing I can say would help very much. Then it would be kidnapping and all sorts of things."

"She's right," Fred mumbled. "We'd better turn around and go back." He clashed the gears again.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What time is it?"

GENEVIEVE GLANCED at her wristwatch. "A little after three," she said. "I've got to get back by three-thirty at the latest. If we hurry we can just make it."

"Why three-thirty?" I asked. "That's when the other girl takes over. They won't need you then. Why, we could stay out all night!"

"We *must* get back," Genevieve pleaded, a franticness in her voice.

I took a deep breath. "That's what I wanted to know," I said.

"Maybe she's right, Lefty," Fred said. "I can't see—"

"Did you ever hear of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?" I said. I saw by his expression that he had. "And Cinderella? *She* had to be home by midnight."

If Genevieve had been pale before, it was a Florida tan to what she was now.

"I get it," Fred Mayhem said, suddenly a bird of prey once more. "We keep her until after she's supposed to change. It all fits together now."

"Right," I said. "Only you'd better drive someplace where we can have some witnesses that the police will listen to, because they aren't going to believe us."

Genevieve stared at me in dismay. Suddenly she exploded into action, screaming and clawing at me. Fred started the car, hunching over the wheel. In a moment we were going sixty again — away from the direction of the hospital.

Genevieve turned from me to attack Fred, seeming determined now to wreck the car.

"Keep her off of me!" Fred croaked.

I pulled her back onto the seat, pushed her down, and sat on her. She fought to get up while the miles sped by. We passed a good many farmhouses. I told Fred to keep going.

I had Genevieve's arm in a position where I could see her wristwatch. Finally it was three-thirty. Ahead was an intersection with a busy state highway.

"All right, Fred," I said. "Pull into the service station. It's too late for her to get back before she changes even if a police car took her with its siren wide open."

The car jounced off the pave-

ment onto the gravel and came to a stop by the pumps. I got off of Genevieve as the attendant came toward us.

"Help!" Genevieve shouted. "I'm the hospital nurse that was kidnapped by these maniacs! Get the police!"

"Nice girl," I said, grinning. "That's what I wanted you to say. Keep it up. You may have time to save yourself yet!"

The startled service station attendant started to back away. I opened the door and got out, holding the gardening tool in my pocket like a gun. "Stop where you are," I snarled dangerously.

A minute later I had the other two attendants with him.

"Now listen to what I have to say," I said. "And listen carefully. Mr. Mayhem is a retired detective and I'm his deputy. We're going to let you call the police shortly. I'll tell you when."

"He doesn't have a gun!" Genevieve said desperately. "Don't let him bluff you. One of you get in here and drive me back to the hospital as fast as you can!"

"Tell them who you are, Genevieve," I said, grinning at them.

"I'm the nurse that was kidnapped!" she snapped.

"Take a good look at her," I said. But the three men were doing just that.

She was almost frothing at the

mouth as she screamed, "You fools! Do something!" And then she was screaming at them and crying.

And suddenly she wasn't.

The terror vanished from her eyes like a shift of scene on a movie screen, to be replaced by surprise, then hope. She looked at the three men, at Fred Mayhem, then at me. And recognition lit up her expression.

"Thank God!" she breathed. "Oh, thank God!"

MAYBE YOU READ about it in the newspapers. They had my picture, and Fred Mayhem's. When things got straightened out the state police raided the Ward J building and rescued the others, and by morning the effects of the drug had worn off in the night crew.

Then the whole story came out, how Dr. Parker had discovered a drug that produced temporary amnesia. He tried it on himself and it worked. What he didn't realize was that the personality in force during amnesia remembered from one amnesia period to the next, and, as they explained it, became a continuing but separate personality.

This other Dr. Parker soon used the stuff on other people, and the amnesiac personalities started a system where the rightful personalities were kept locked up when

they had control of the body.

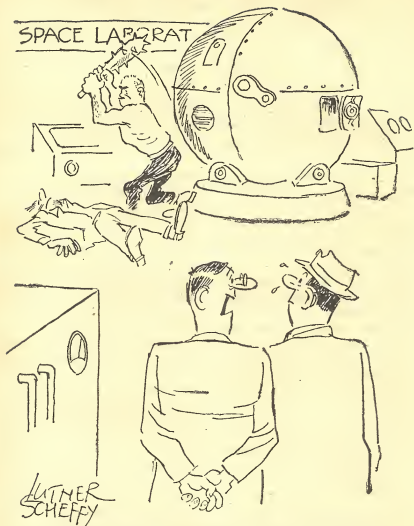
One of them was the millionaire that donated the money for the new hospital, and the gang of Mr. Hydes picked a few hundred people who could staff it, and built a perfect setup where they could keep themselves locked up when they had to let the drug wear off.

As they explained it, it was the instinct for survival. And certainly that other Genevieve had acted as though she were going to die when she knew she couldn't get back to the hospital in time to have the real Genevieve locked up when the dope wore off.

Fred Mayhem was given a gold medal for his brilliant deductions. He really had been a good detective before he stopped too many blackjacks that damaged his brain.

Genevieve—well, Genevieve was very grateful to me. She even kissed me. Then she and Dr. Parker got married. It seems they had been in love all the time, and had been going to get married just as soon as his experiments were successful, only they had been too successful.

Me — drop out to the Mable Farnsworth Memorial Hospital sometime. You'll see me somewhere near the administration building weeding the geranium beds where I can watch the visitors come and go, and get a smile from Genevieve when she gets off duty.



"We're teaching him what it feels like to be hit by a meteor!"

Strike The First Blow!

by

Randall Garrett

Jordan Karr was called a traitor and that could only mean he had to die; yet if he did it also meant Earthman would never know freedom...

JORDAN KARR wasn't expecting it when Leo Duvernoy rose from his seat, pointed at him, and said, "I name Jordan Karr as traitor—as the tool of our despised alien overlords!"

Instantly Karr was on his feet. "That's a lie. That's a dirty lie, Duvernoy! I'm no more a traitor than you are!"

A smile spread slowly over Duvernoy's lean, cadaverous face, while a deadly hush prevailed in the underground cell of the Earth Resistance Group. "Bold words, Jordan Karr — but they ring with untruth."

Marya Filip, who led the female wing of the Group, signalled that she would speak.

"Leo, this is a serious charge. In the five hundred years that this group has planned and plotted to overthrow the Protoids, we've never once had a traitor among us—else

our overlords would long since have wiped us out. Now the charge is raised. Do you have proof of what you speak?"

"Of course," Duvernoy said. Jordan Karr watched incredulously as Duvernoy produced a thick portfolio of documents and handed them over to Marya Filip.

"You can't believe him!" Karr said wildly. "You all know me—I'm no traitor! I hate the Protoids as much as any of you!"

"Quiet, Jordan," Marya said as she examined the portfolio. "You're a newcomer to our group; Leo is one of our most respected members. In such a matter we must at least listen to him. Silence, while I look over what he has given me."

The room was utterly quiet; Karr heard his own harsh breathing. Marya leafed through the documents. When she looked up, her dark eyes were heavy with rage.



"According to these papers, Jordan Karr, we have unquestioned proof of your disloyalty. Leo, we thank you for unmasking this man before he destroyed the Resistance Group completely. And as for you, Jordan Karr—the sentence must be death!"

Karr sprang to his feet instantly,

as soon as Marya had pronounced the last word. He reached Duvernoy's side and smashed a fist into the accuser's unsmiling face; Duvernoy looked astonished and started to buckle.

Three members of the group stood between Karr and the exit. They advanced toward him—but

he was fighting for his life. He threw himself upon them, kicking and striking out almost at random with his fists, and hewed a path through them to the door.

"After him!" Duvernoy screamed. "Don't let him escape!"

Karr slipped lithely through the door and up into the winding tunnel that led to ground level. His lungs were pumping furiously; his lips were tight with anger.

Me—a traitor? It isn't true!

HE REACHED SURFACE level unmolested and edged out into the street, between two of the uncleared rubble-heaps still left from the war of centuries before. He paused for a moment, not sure which way to move, when three pursuers emerged from the tunnel.

"There he is! After him!"

Karr sped away—toward the slimy bulk of a Protoid policeman standing at the corner. It was loathsome to have to go to a Protoid for help, but in this crazy turn-about friends had become enemies and enemies friends.

"Guard! Guard! These men want to rob me!"

The Protoid turned, fixed its smooth faceless head on him, then extended a lumpy arm toward the pursuers, who had halted. "Are those the men?" it asked, in its burly voice.

Karr glanced at the three, who were glaring bitterly at him. "No—no, it was three other men. I've never seen these three before. But will you escort me home?"

"Certainly," the Protoid said. Karr grinned at his helpless pursuers as the alien led the way. In their way, he thought, the Protoids weren't so bad; they ruled Earth more or less benevolently. But they ruled Earth, and he hated them for that; he had joined the Resistance Group to strike a blow for humanity's independence.

As he followed the Protoid, he reflected sourly that this would certainly cinch his "guilt" the way nothing else could. Here he was, fleeing from the Resistance Group—and calling on a Protoid to help him escape!

Well, let them think whatever they wanted. Jordan Karr felt bitter anger surge up inside him. It was a frameup; he *knew* it was a frameup. He had no possible reason to want to betray the Group to the Protoids.

He set his jaw. He was going to prove his innocence some way. The Group would never let a known traitor live—not now, when Earth's counterattack against the more and more complacent Protoids was almost ready to begin.

But how? How to convince them that he was no traitor?

"Here's where I live, guard. Thanks very much."

"We must keep the peace," the Protoid observed sententiously, and, nodding, moved away.

Karr entered. He lived in a one-room affair, all that was allotted a man of his unmarried state and twenty-six years by the Protoid overlords. Marriages, births, size of family—these things the Protoids controlled. Karr hated the aliens savagely.

But the Resistance Group had cast him out, and probably even now they were planning to take his life. *Damn* Duvernoy! Karr wished he had had just a squint at the so-called "evidence" the slab-faced man had mustered against him.

He slouched despondently in his one chair. What could you do when the group you desperately wanted to help was out for your scalp?

LATER THAT NIGHT Karr left his room, eluded the Protoid guards pacing the darkened streets, and slipped back to the hidden tunnel-entrance.

Perhaps the "evidence" was still there. He wanted to get a look at it and see just what it was that condemned him so strongly.

A Protoid was mousing about the street as he drew near. Karr glanced in both directions—he had to be on

the lookout for his former friends as well as the aliens—and ducked into the tunnel mouth.

Minutes later he was whirling the nucleon-lock that held the cell blocked to outsiders, and slid back the door. It was dark within. Good. No one there.

He found the file-cabinet and again spun the lock. Within was the portfolio Duvernoy had handed Marya.

Tensely Karr opened it. Read.

They were transcripts of conversations between an alien and an unnamed Terran, in which the Terran revealed the location of many Resistance Cells—though not this one—and explained the aims and purposes of the Group.

There were also photos showing an alien and an Earthman talking. The Earthman's back was to the camera; he was tall, lean, wide-shouldered. He could have been any one of a dozen members of the Group.

No. Not so. The Earthman came nearly to the alien's chin. Only two members of this Group were so tall: Karr and—

And Duvernoy.

He stiffened suddenly, realizing what had been done. It was *Duvernoy* who was the traitor!

Someone had taken these photos and recorded these transcripts—some Group member who planned

to turn Duvernoy in. Karr smiled grimly as he filled in the rest of the picture. Duvernoy had gained access to the evidence and probably had done away with whoever had gathered it.

But transcripts and photos could be duplicated. Merely destroying the evidence would not have assured Duvernoy freedom to continue his devilish work; there was always the chance that a negative might fall into the wrong hands and be used to denounce him.

So Duvernoy, the damnable fox, had made use of the evidence—using it to accuse Karr, a new member of the group who happened to resemble the man in the photograph. At a quick casual glance it might indeed seem that the photos were of Karr—particularly if the only other person they might be were Duvernoy, and Duvernoy was doing the denouncing. No one would ever suspect *him!*

And now full onus had fallen on Karr, and Duvernoy was in the clear, the damaging records safely accounted for as witness to the crimes of Karr.

Suddenly there was the sound of talking from outside. Karr flattened himself against the wall. Someone was coming! He slipped away into the concealing shadows, after restoring the portfolio to the file and closing it. He waited as

the door slowly opened.

FIVE FIGURES entered—Duvernoy, Marya Filip, and three other leaders of the Resistance Group.

They took seats around the table in the center of the cell. Duvernoy took his position at the head of the table.

Damn him, Karr thought. *How I'd like to dash out there and—*

But it was his word against Duvernoy's. And now they would never believe such a fantastic story, even if it happened to be true.

He strained his ears to catch what they were saying.

Duvernoy was talking "In view of the situation that's been precipitated, I feel we ought to get moving on Project One immediately."

"You mean the uprising against the aliens?" Marya asked, leaning forward.

"Yes. We've been planning it for centuries. The strategies have been handed down from generation to generation while we gathered strength and built up our organization. But now—"

"Because of Jordan Karr?"

Duvernoy nodded. "With Karr at large—since our men regrettably failed to kill him—we stand the risk of exposure at any minute."

The hypocrite! Karr thought

savagely.

"And therefore," said Marya, "we'd better get our offensive moving before the aliens crack down on us."

"Exactly. Strike now, while they're still digesting the information he's already given them. The time has come!"

Marya's eyes glittered in anticipation of battle. She turned to the other three, who had been silent.

"Rolf, how do you vote?"

"I think Duvernoy's right," a deep voice said. "We have to get moving at once."

"And you, Horand?"

"The same."

"Fredrik?"

"There's no doubt about it. We may have just a few hours left before the crackdown comes. We've got to get under way immediately!"

"Very well, then," Duvernoy said. "You four get to our other four transmitters and start spreading the word all over the globe to the other cells. This will have to be a unified activity, or it'll fail."

"We'll go right now," Marya said. "Plan One is to be activated in let's see, make it seventy-five minutes. That gives us time to mobilize forces all over the world."

"Right."

Duvernoy stood up and waited

until the others had left. In the shadows, Karr forced himself to hold back.

LOCATION OF THE OTHER four transmitters had been among the information Duvernoy had handed over to the aliens. The fifth was here, mounted behind a picture on the wall.

Karr watched as Duvernoy removed the picture, took down the tuner and mike, began to turn dials. A slight hum told him that the set was working.

"Hello — is this Protoid HQ?"

A pulse of rage went through Karr. Duvernoy was going to betray the Group before his eyes!

Duvernoy listened for a moment. Then he said, "HQ — this is Duvernoy. I've got big news. Get it all down and you can smash the traitors this very day!"

Karr repressed an ironic chuckle at Duvernoy's talk of "traitors." To Duvernoy, of course, traitors were those who opposed the Protoid masters.

Karr had other ideas on the matter.

"Listen to this," Duvernoy continued. "In seventy-five min —"

That was all Karr could take. He sprang from hiding and grabbed the microphone away from the astonished Duvernoy.

"Tune in some other time," he

said contemptuously to the listening alien, and broke the contact. Then he turned to Duvernoy.

"Hello, there, friend. Who's the traitor now?"

"Karr —"

"That's right. Karr. The man you *framed*, Duvernoy. The man who just heard you telling the Protoid masters that we were going to —"

Duvernoy leapt.

Karr rocked backward under the assault, bowed his legs to hold his balance, and pummelled upward, driving a fierce left into Duvernoy's lean stomach. The other grunted and backed away.

Karr advanced. In the bare, cold cell, echoes of the struggle ricocheted from the walls. Karr jumped forward and smashed his fists savagely into the other's face.

"Traitor, am I? I'll show you who the traitor is!"

A bloody trickle started from Duvernoy's mouth. He spat the blood away and lashed a quick blow to Karr's midsection. Karr grunted, gave ground.

They locked together for an instant, swaying without either man being able to gain headway on the other. Then Karr bent lithely back; surprised, Duvernoy leaned forward automatically and Karr clubbed down on the side of his neck with the edge of his fist.

Duvernoy gasped for breath. Karr pounded three quick, merciless blows into the other's stomach, and Duvernoy sagged. Karr grabbed him by the throat and threw him down on a bench.

"Okay, Duvernoy. I'm going to turn on the tape recorder and you're going to start talking. You're going to tell all about how you been feeding stuff to the aliens and how you tried to put the fix on me. And if you don't, I'm going to see to it that you don't do any talking of any kind after this."

Duvernoy glared angrily at him. Karr snapped on the recorder, then drew near. "Start talking."

"No."

Karr slapped him. "Go ahead."

Hesitantly, Duvernoy began to talk. He poured out the entire story of how he had joined the Group solely to betray it, had worked himself into a position of confidence over a long span of time, how he had finally begun feeding secrets to the Protoids.

He told of how he had been discovered by a young member of the Group — and how he had found it necessary to throw blame on Karr to save his own neck.

"That's enough," Karr said. "That'll sound real nice when I play it at your trial — the trial of all collaborators with the Protoids!"

HE TOOK A LENGTH of rope from the supply closet and bound Duvernoy securely.

"That ought to hold you," he said. He lifted Duvernoy, bound hand and foot, and stowed him in the closet where he would be out of the way. Then he turned back to the transmitter.

Ten minutes had passed. Sixty-five remained.

Rapidly he began to flash the word along the chain of relay that had long been established.

"Project One in sixty-five minutes."

"Project One in sixty-five minutes."

"Project One in sixty-five minutes."

It took almost three-quarters of an hour before he had notified all the stations in the chain. Now, he knew, Earthmen all over the world would be arising, taking down the guns and knives they had hidden so long, getting ready to kill the Protoids everywhere and re-establish man's dominion over his own planet.

In Duvernoy's documents he had cautioned the Protoids to bide their time, not to wipe out the Resistance Groups just yet. Duvernoy had intended to give final signal now — but Duvernoy lay struggling in the closet, helpless. The aliens

would be taken by surprise. They wouldn't stand a chance.

Karr glanced at his watch. In eight minutes Earthmen would spring from their homes, from behind trees, from everywhere, bearing weapons that were home made, hidden in cellars and attics waiting for this day. The signal had been given. Millions would die in the frenzied attack — but when it was over, Earth would again have its freedom.

Six minutes. Five. Now Karr edged up through the tunnel to ground level, clutching a knife. He paused at the edge of the entrance.

Three minutes. Two.

One. A Protoid guard paced unsuspectingly in the street. Karr grinned. He would redeem himself; he would strike the first blow.

"Die, alien!" he yelled, and rushed from hiding. His blade sank hilt-deep in alien flesh. And as the Protoid toppled, Karr emitted a roar of delight.

All around him now, men were bursting forth, knives and pitchforks high. This was the day of Earth's liberation.

"Kill the aliens!" came the cry from first ten lips, then a hundred, then a thousand as the rebellion spread. And Jordan Karr led all the rest as the aliens fell before the inexorable tide.

VANISHING ACT

by

Robert Randall

These crimes were perfect —no clues, no fingerprints—no nothing. Even the police had no idea exactly how perfect they really were!

THE HEADLINE in the morning telefax said,
**CRIME WAVE STILL
PLAGUES CITY**

Detective Bailey frowned and brought the telefax sheet closer to his somewhat myopic eyes. He read:

"N'Yok found itself in the third day of the worst crime wave in its history today. More than one hundred individual thefts were reported — most of them from supposedly "thief-proof" places.

"The N'Yok Federal Reserve Bank reported the loss of nearly \$25,000 in gold bullion and the same amount in paper money. The N'York Public Library reported theft of fifty books and pamphlets of all descriptions. More than \$1000 worth of food pellets was taken from the laboratories of -"

Bailey sighed and put the 'fax sheet down. Things were getting worse and worse and it was his

job to find the thieves.

Except that they obstreperously insisted on breaking into sealed vaults, museum cases, closed shelves of libraries, and extracting their loot without disturbing locks, doors, windows or anything else.

There were no clues, no fingerprints. *No nothing*, Bailey thought sourly. And there would be a big shakeup in the Detective Bureau if this went on. He'd be pounding a beat somewhere in Outer Canarsie before long.

Another item in the telefax caught his eye.

CALLISTANS REPORTED MISSING

"The pair of Callistan natives brought back to Earth by the Smathers Expedition earlier this week are missing from the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Life, it was learned today.

"The two alien creatures vanished three days ago, a Bureau official



declared, but word was withheld until today in hope that the Callistans might be found somewhere in the Bureau building in Washington. Plans are - -"

Gears meshed in Detective Bailey's mind. The crime wave had begun three days ago. The pair of Callistans had vanished at the same time.

Now, either the Callistans were

victims of the crime wave—

Or they were causing it!

It seemed logical. It was worth investigating. With his badge hanging on the outcome of the crime wave, Detective Bailey could hardly afford to pass up any possibility whatsoever.

THE BUREAU OF EXTRA-terrestrial Life was just off the

Mall, in Washington. Bailey paused outside for a moment, then went in.

"I'd like to see the curator, please."

"Sorry, Mr. Hegley isn't seeing anyone today. These Callistans —"

"I'm Bailey. New York Detectives. I'd like to see the curator."

"Oh — sorry, sir. One flight up and first door to your left."

Curator Hegley was a small, wrinkled man who might well have been an extraterrestrial himself. He bore a haggard, hunted look.

"I'm Bailey. New York Detectives."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Beely? And please make it brief. These Callistans—"

"Yes, I know. That's why I'm here."

"Oh? Do you have any information about them, Mr. Beely?"

"Bailey. No, I don't know much about them. But you know of this crime wave we're having in N'Yok?"

"Vaguely. Things disappearing out of locked rooms and so forth. You think our Callistans were stolen the same way, you mean?"

"Quite possibly," Bailey said. "But I'm operating on a different assumption just now. I think the Callistans are doing the stealing!"

"I'm afraid I don't follow," said the Curator.

"Tell me something: what sort of cage were the Callistans in while being examined?"

"Completely sealed, Mr. Bailey. There was no possible way for them to get out or for anyone to get in. And the seals were undisturbed."

Bailey took a deep breath. "Do you think it's at all likely, Mr. Hegley, that the Callistans could have passed *through* the cage?"

"What?"

"I mean, de-materialize themselves and come out on the other side. And then go on a rampage of theft."

The curator scowled suspiciously. "That sounds like a Sunday-supplement idea, Mr. Boolie. We didn't have time to examine them, of course, but — well, really —"

"It's not as far-fetched as it seems," Bailey said. "Look here, Mr. Hegley: *something* is going through walls to perpetrate those crimes. There's no doubt of that; locked rooms are being entered and stolen from. So there's a force at large that we don't understand."

"Perhaps."

"Not perhaps! Definitely! All right, now: your Callistans have been removed from their cage by this force. It seems logical to me that they themselves are exerting the force! They're the only extraneous factors in the case. No

such phenomenon has ever happened at a time when the Callistans weren't on Earth. Only in the last three days - -"

Bailey suddenly realized he was wasting his breath. Hegley could be of no help and there was nothing to be won by convincing him of his theory.

BUT BY NIGHTFALL it wasn't a theory any more. Bailey had caught the 6 p. m. commuting rocket back to New York and, standing jammed elbow - to - elbow with busy, tired office-workers, he heard everyone discussing the case.

"Seems someone saw a little green man appear and vanish right in front of her," a man said.

"Yeah. I heard it on the late afternoon newscast. Must be one of those aliens that escaped."

Bailey frowned but took it all in. And when he returned to his office he demanded an immediate resume from Stein, his subordinate.

"It seems a woman teller was writing up an account at the Chase Bank today," Stein informed him. "Suddenly this tiny goblin-like figure appeared."

"Description?"

"About two feet high, four arms, two legs, greenish-gray in color."

Bailey nodded. That matched

the description Hegley had given him of the missing Callistans. "Go ahead," he snapped.

"Well, this little goblin appeared, grinned at her, and vanished. She reported it to her manager and he immediately thought about the bank vault."

"Smart man," Bailey commented.

"The time-lock was set for an hour later, so they couldn't get in there till then. But when they finally opened it up they found \$10,000 missing."

Bailey scratched his forehead as he digested the data. "Okay, Stein. That all?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Get out there and dig up anything else you can. We've got to crack this case. N'Yok's at the mercy of these alien beings."

He stared fiercely at Stein, trying to communicate some of the suppressed rage that his own superiors would no doubt be hurling at him before much more time had passed. Stein quailed, just as Bailey would be quailing later.

"Yessir."

BAILEY REMAINED at his desk a long while, brooding. Life had been so simple just three days before. Nothing but a few murders, rapes, robberies. Simple robberies, committed by human

beings wielding guns and bludgeons and making finger-prints so they could be caught.

Now, no guns. No fingerprints.

No human beings. Just invisible pixies from Jupiter's moons who flitted in and out of bank vaults at will. And it was Bailey's job to catch them.

Sighing, he rose and opened the faxfile. He found the information he wanted.

Three days before, the Smathers Expedition had returned from Callisto, Jupiter's largest moon. The expedition had consisted of one man, Leroy Smathers, an adventurer and space-pilot who had volunteered to make the closest approach to giant Jupiter yet known to man.

Smathers had made the trip safely and had brought back two natives of the large moon. These, as was Earth's custom, were immediately taken from his ship upon landing and conveyed to Washington, to the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Life, for study and observation.

Smathers himself had retired to his home and was working on a book detailing his experiences on Callisto. He refused to let anyone see him and after his landing would not speak to any reporters.

And the Callistans, Bailey reflected, had escaped from the Bureau almost immediately after

they had arrived there.

Well, Smathers had succeeded in capturing two of the creatures. Evidently he knew how to make them refrain from popping back and forth through walls. Otherwise he never would have been able to bring them back from their home world.

The next man to see was Smathers.

SMATHERS LIVED in the Bronx, a search of police files revealed. Bailey caught a late rocket north and minutes later found himself in front of the vast dwelling, in which Smathers lived.

The doorman in the lobby said, "Whom do you wish to see, sir?"

"Mr. Smathers. Is he at home?"

"Mr. Smathers has left instructions that he is not to be disturbed, sir. The only one who may go upstairs is the grocery delivery boy. Are you, perhaps, the grocery delivery boy?"

"I'm Detective Bailey of the police. Now, will you let me see Smathers or do I have to arrest you?"

The doorman paled. "Mr. Smathers will be very angry, sir - -"

"Well?"

"Very well, sir. Mr. Smathers lives in Apartment 13-A."

Bailey took the elevator—one of those modern lift-tubes that rose

like an accelerating rocket. A bit shaken up, he clambered out at the 13th floor and waited for his stomach to catch up with him.

Then he approached the unmarked door to his right. All the others had letters, beginning with B and running through H. This *had* to be 13-A.

He rang the buzzer.

There was no response.

Bailey rang again. And again.

Finally a harsh voice said, "Who's there?"

"Groceries!" Bailey said.

"Just a second, will you?"

There was the sound of a bolt sliding back and the door opened about half an inch. "All right," said the voice from within. "Hand them here and I'll take care of them."

"Sure thing Mr. Smathers," Bailey said. He jammed his foot against the partially - open door and heaved. Smathers was caught with his latch down. By the time he exerted any counter-pressure Bailey was inside.

Smathers was a wiry little fellow, a bit over five feet tall, who looked angry enough to emit gamma rays.

"Who are you? What do you mean, breaking in like this? I'll call the police! I'll -"

"I *am* the police," Bailey said quietly. "Mind if I talk to you for a while?"

"About what?" Smathers asked suspiciously.

"About the Callistans," Bailey said.

Smathers eyed him hostilely. "What do you want to know about them? I turned them over to the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Life the day I landed."

"I know. They escaped. Tell me something, Mr. Smathers—can your Callistans teleport? I mean, can they pass through walls or anything like that?"

"Absolutely not!" Smathers said vehemently. "Whatever gave you that fantastic idea? Teleport? Madness!"

Bailey saw his case exploding like a soap-bubble before his eyes. "Are you sure of that, Mr. Smathers? You didn't notice any extra-sensory manifestations while you were on Callisto? This information is exceedingly important, you know. The crime wave—"

"I don't know anything about any crime wave. I haven't been in contact with the outside world at all until you came crashing in here. And as for the Callistans being able to teleport—"

Smathers stopped suddenly. His eyes went wide with shock and dismay. He tried to make words come out, and failed.

Bailey whirled to see what was causing Smathers' difficulty. And then his eyes went wide.

A small gray-green creature with four arms stood there, apparently having materialized right behind Bailey. Two of its four arms were full of green bills, stacked neatly and bound together.

The creature said, in a piping voice, "Here you are, chief. Twenty thousand more, out of the Federal Reserve."

SMATHERS FINALLY recovered control of his voice. He pointed at Bailey and said, "Idiot! Dolt! Vanish!"

Bailey heard a *pop!* The Callistan vanished.

"I think you owe me an explanation," the detective said. "If these Callistans can't teleport what was that one doing here—with all that money?"

"I - - I - - I don't know anything about it. I didn't see anything. You must be having hallucinations!"

"I doubt that, Smathers. If you don't mind I'd like to investigate the rest of this apartment."

"I forbid it! Where's your search warrant? I'll sue! I'll - -"

Bailey brushed the small man aside and stepped out of the foyer into the adjoining living-room.

He paled.

The living-room was stacked high with books, pictures, money, gold bullion. All of the missing items seemed to be here.

Behind him, Smathers said, "Well, now you know."

"So you're the thief?"

"Not me. My two friends from Callisto." Smathers signalled and two small alien creatures appeared out of nowhere and perched on his shoulders.

"You've been stealing—or rather, they've been stealing these things for you. Why?"

"I liked it on Callisto," Smathers said. "I decided to return to Earth and made use of my friends' teleportation abilities to build up a stockpile of useful things. Then I was going to steal back my ship, with their help, and return to Callisto. I'd live all alone there, surrounded by my booty."

Bailey smiled sadly. "It's too bad it didn't work, eh, Smathers? It sounds like a wonderful dream. But now that we know, we'll have to take all this stuff back and ship your two pals back to Callisto before they cause any more confusion."

Smathers shrugged. "Well, it *would* have been nice. But I guess I'll have to do without all these things now. Too bad, too."

"Yes. Too bad. Suppose we go down to Headquarters, now, Smathers?"

"Headquarters? Sorry, officer. I'm not going."

"The hell you say. Your game is up, Smathers. We know - -"

"Unfortunately, you *don't* know, officer. There's one fact you don't know about Callistan teleportation."

"And that is?"

Smathers grinned impishly. "It can be learned by Earthmen."

Bailey's eyes widened. "You mean - -"

Pop! went the Callistan on Smathers' right shoulder.

Pop! went the one on the left shoulder.

Desperately Bailey leaped for Smathers. His arms closed on empty air.

Pop! went Smathers.

THE END



"No, Ferguson, it's your turn—I caught the last one!"



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Mrs. Orvil Werling: R. R. 2 Ossian, Ind.

Age 26: "I'm married, have a four month old son, and have been a science fiction fan for 11 years. I'm interested in ESP, archaeology, astronomy and music (especially light classical and folk). My hobbies include s-f collecting and poetry. I'd like to hear from fans with similar interests."

DANCING TEACHER & NURSE

Valda D. Forsyth: Box 736, Jamestown, N.Y.

Age 40: "I'm a dancing teacher and nurse, interested in the raising of dogs—especially toy poodles. Also interested in photography, handcraft, and the investigation of psychic phenomena particularly from the aspect of spontaneous physical and mental healing. I have a wire recorder transcriber, so can

correspond by letter or wireresponse."

STUDENT

Philip C. Norfleet: 2585 S. Humboldt St., Denver 10, Colo.

Age 15: "I'm a high school student. My hobbies include s-f reading and collecting, electronics, astronomy, and all the sciences in general. I'd like to write s-f stories and am interested in UFO, ESP, and time travel. Would also like to play chess with anyone via mail."

EDITORIAL WRITER

Eugene Bertram Willard: P.O. Box 224, Everett 49, Mass.

Age 75: "I'm not dependent on a cane so don't let my age fool you. I've been an editorial writer in many media for many years. I have a deep interest in science fiction and would like to discuss factual sciences with interested readers."

STUDENT

John Wiese: 1643 Lincoln Ave., Des Plaines, Ill.

Age 14: "Naturally, I like science fiction. I'd like to hear from others my age, guys and gals, interested in basketball, psi powers, and those who'd like to try a series of telepathic experiments."

TAXIDERMIST

Elizabeth Reams: P. O. Box 167, North Platte, Nebr.

Age 50: "I'm a taxidermist by profession, also holding a degree as a Dr. of Psychic Science. I'd like to correspond with anyone interested in Atlantis, Lemuria, and particularly those who would like to discuss the interpretations of the symbols, metaphors and allegories of the ancient histories, myths and legends."

STUDENT

Zenobia Raghunandan: 41 Eldert St., Brooklyn 7, N.Y.

Age 15: "I'm an s-f reader who would like to correspond with boys and girls my age—or adults—on any subject not too technical. I own a tape recorder so can exchange taped letters."

STUDENT

Jon Brooker: 629 Central Ave., Fort Erie, Ont., Canada.

Age 14: "I'm a freshman in high school, read widely in both science fiction and fantasy. Enjoy all types of music with possible exception of heavy classical. I'm particularly fond of calypso. Would like to hear

from guys and gals similarly interested in the above, also swimming."

STUDENT

Susie Ley: 365 North St., Babylon, N.Y.

Age 15: "I'm a high school student, science fiction fan, and rock 'n roll enthusiast. I'm an Elvis Presley fan to boot! Will enjoy hearing from others my age."

AVIATION TECH

Jerry Garriott: VA65, NAS, Alameda, Calif.

Age 20: "I'm an Aviation Electronics Tech, 3rd class. I'm from Wyoming, with interests including sports, pop records, and of course, radio electronics. Also have a keen interest in motorcycles, and being a good sailor—girls! Hope to hear from anyone interested."

STUDENT

Maria Baldanado: 2418 Cherry St., Hoquiam, Wash.

Age 14: "I'm a high school freshman, with interests including science fiction, corresponding, dancing, and general teenage pursuits. Hope to hear from boys and girls my age."

STUDENT

Cloyd McCurdy: Rt. 5, Box 474, Springfield, Mo.

Age 15: "I'm a high school sophomore, interested in s-f, pop music (especially Pat Boone) flying saucers, and general science. I tinker with radios and would like to hear from other fans."

SAILOR

Charles Brown: USS Tarawa, CVS-40, E Division, FPO, New York, N.Y.

Age 20: "I'm a collector of science fiction and fantasy, with my occupation being the US Navy. That plain and simple."

STUDENT

Mike Solomon: 2441 Laurelhurst Dr., University Heights, Ohio

Age 14: "I'm an s-f fan, also interested in ESP, radio, writing, swimming, and clarinet playing. Will look forward to hearing from others."

DUTCH STUDENT

Martin C. Hopman: Nieuweweg 29A.S., Soest, Holland

Age 21: "I'm a college student majoring in sociology. I'd like to write to American boys and girls my age, about s-f and other subjects, including photography, anthropology, sailing, and music—from Strawinsky to Sinatra. I'd also like to receive American s-f magazines as they are exceedingly difficult to obtain here in Europe. I can exchange French and German magazines."

STUDENT

Sandy Chamberlain: Box 71, Look-out Mountain, Tenn.

Age 18: "I'm a college freshman, s-f enthusiast, and an ardent student of hypnosis, especially its therapeutic applications. I enjoy riding, singing, and arguing! Will write to any interested."

SWEDISH FAN

Bertil Arvidsson: Hasthagsterassen 17, Gustavsberg, Sweden

Age 30: "I'm very interested in science fiction and would appreciate hearing from American fans. Other interests include literature and stamp collecting."

SWEDISH FAN

Peter Bystrom: Hyttlidgalan 58B, Skelleftea, Sweden

Age 12: "I'm a young s-f reader and fan, with interests including sports and photography. I sincerely hope American fans my age will write to me."

HOUSEWIFE

Mary Zukowski: 1800 W. Tioga St., Philadelphia 40, Pa.

Age 36: "I'm a housewife, mother of four children. I enjoy science fiction—have been reading it since I was 11. I'd like to correspond with other fans."

HOUSEWIFE

Jeanne B. Wilson: 658 S. 5th East, Brigham City, Utah

Age 32: "I'm a housewife with 2 boys and 3 girls. I like writing both letters and stories, collecting horse figurines, and cooking. Hope to contact other fans my age in this country and abroad."

STUDENT

Ronald Weston: 1120 Penley Blvd., Salem, Va.

Age 13: "I'm interested in astronomy, archeology, mythology, anthropology, and, of course, s-f. Hope to hear from boys and girls my age."

STUDENT

Bill Murphy: 207 S. Andre, Saginaw, Mich.

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THE HIGHEST PRICE that I have ever heard of for a scientific property has been paid for *No Blade of Grass*. The reported figure is \$105,000 from MGM, and that's Mighty Good Money in any author's language. Collector of this considerable sum of currency is Christopher Samuel Youd, Anglofan of yore now known professionally on his own shore and cisAtlantic as John Christopher. The novel, called "The Death of Grass" in the land of its origin, was a *Daily Mail* Book of the Month selection in England. *Saturday Evening Post* serialized it here, and Simon & Schuster has produced a hard cover volume. The blurb from the British edition bears partial quoting: "The title gives no hint of the exciting quality of the story, nor of its originality. For it is original to forego all the well-tried familiar science fiction properties—Space Travel, Time

Travel, Super Gadgets and Super Men—and be content with England's green and pleasant land. It is original for an author . . . to hold back so skilfully and for so long his knowledge of the horrors to come. But the trick makes the book." (We shall see if it is retained for the movie.) "The reader is invited, as it were, to come for a gay sleigh-ride with the characters: and, as the party glides off, the slope is so gentle that the sleigh scarcely seems to move. But already, to right and left, the look of the land is changing, and all of a sudden the reader finds himself breathless with excitement, racing down a dangerous hill at top speed, escaping danger and disaster at every turn and curve. And it is not only the landscape which alters: the characters reshape themselves under the reader's eyes and not until the final moment of the

wild adventure does he know whether the end will be total wreck or a safe slowing down in a land where the grass once more grows green and pleasant." Gad, and to think how I used to hate to mow lawns when I was a kid: I often wished every blade of grass would drop dead. At 50c a lawn, 30 years later I still wouldn't be approaching the approximately 40,000 pounds paid for *No Blade of Grass*, altho the accumulated grass cut might have weighed that much! Having paid so much for the original property, we have every reason to believe MGM will make a first class production of the novel. Just as long as they don't write Robby a part in the picture as a robot gardener—!

Nicholas Nayfack has let it be known he is looking for more robotales to adapt to Robby's personality, and has been shown Isaac Asimov's "It's Such A Beautiful Day". If a copy of Ray Cummings' rare Bluebook yarn, "The Robot Rebellion", can be located, he'll be shown that too. (Remember Mekko & Ekko, the metal detectives?) He's finished the second Robby Story, *The Invisible Boy*, and a third one has been purchased, *The Boy Who Saved the World*. A strange conflict has arisen over the latter title: a screen treatment with the identical title, co-authored and registered sometime before by the scriptteam of Thad Swift & Norm Rice, is also science fiction but of an entirely different sort, being a very human comedy rather than robotic.

Produced at a cost of \$200,000, the new *Curse of Frankenstein* began breaking bucks-office records all over the world last July, despite

a cool reception by sci-fi fans many of whom felt it no improvement over, in fact not even the equal of, the original Karloff version a quarter of a century ago. A \$3,000,000 gross is predicted. In the meantime the screen had seen the *Bride, Son, Ghost and House of Frankenstein*—money-makers all—together with a farcical encounter of Abbott & Costello with the world's most famous monster, and now word comes that there's to be a *Frankenstein's Castle*. Also *The Curse of Dracula*. By the time this reaches print a sale may have been consummated on the Budd Bankson development of my original idea, **FRANKENSTEIN FROM SPACE** (monster of 1965).

The Man Without A Body and *The Giant of Devil's Crag* have been previewed. . . *The Abdominable Snowman of the Himalayas* has been completed in CinemaScope, starring Peter Cushing, most recently seen in *The Curse of Frankenstein* . . . Title of Curt Siodmak's *The Amazons* has been changed to *Women from Green Hell* . . . *Monolith* will be released as *The Monolith Monsters* . . . A slightly altered version of Frank Quattrocchi's script *Gigantoso* (aka *Giganturo*) may serve as the basis for a sequel I suggested to *The Amazing Colossal Man*, *The* (what else?) *Amazing* (or *Astounding*) *Colossal* (Teen-age?) *Girl* (or *Woman*).

A LETTER to DAILY VARIETY signed Sam Kurtzman reads: "I'm having last Wednesday's issue encased between two sheets of plate glass, surrounded by transparent plastic and welded within a pressurized steel cylinder.

I want my children and my children's children to know that in 1957 A. D. a motion picture was named **I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF**. Anxiously awaiting the sequel, **I WAS A BABY SITTER FOR DRACULA'S DAUGHTER FROM OUTER SPACE**. Anxious reader may see such a title sooner than he thinks, considering that an actual plot is afoot to produce **CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE VAMPIRE, DRACULA'S BLOOD** and (cross my tendrils) **I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN!** But can you conceive of the colossal (amazing, astounding, incredible) sadism of a man who would inflict a punishment like that (the time capsule) on generations yet unborn? Why, in my granddaddy's day they would have horsewhipped a man like that, provided Groucho Marx' mustache had been available for the occasion.

ADAM AND EVE and Matheson! Now there's a combination! The inevitable end result of shrinking people, I suppose, Dick is now turning back the clock scriptwise and reducing the population of the earth two its original two! MGM will produce; that is, Albert Zugsmith, with whom Matheson was associated with *The Incredible Shrinking Man*.

Remember the best sci-fi comedy we ever had, Alec Guinness as *The Man in the White Suit*? Roger MacDougall, author of the original screenplay, will next essay *The Mouse That Roared*, from the farcetched novel and SEP serial by Leonard Wibberly.

Unknown Terror, completed, is the "mad doctor rides again" theme, cast—but literally, this time—in

the same old familiar mold, for this concerns a malignant fungus that threatens to get loose and goose the world. Some fun, eh, Gus? Companion feature: *Back from the Dead*. Catherine Turney wrote the latter; you may have read it as "The Other One". This one has echoes and overtones of oldies like *Supernatural* and *Bewitched* and *The 7th Victim*. The body of a man's second wife is possessed by the spirit of his dead first. Sister of the second wife sets out to exorcise the interloper. Everybody gets quite exercised in the end when a sect of evil-worshippers has to sacrifice its blood bath instead of its intended victim.

Liane of the Jungle, Rainer Eisfeld of Germany informs me, features a semi-nude blond goddess who jaunts about the jungle clad only in a tree-string.

THANK YOU, Arthur Gardner, for the phone call about *The Flame Barrier* by Sam X. Abarbanel, which your Gramercy Pictures will produce. Your *Monster That Challenged the World* was a bit of all right. . . Thanks, Morris Scott Dolens, for informing me that Transfilm, after more than 3 years, has completed its 27-minute solar system film, based (in technicolor) on the LIFE series . . . *Merci beaucoup*, Georges Gallet, for the flashes from France that Jules Verne's "Face Au Drapeau" has been filmed as *Invention of Destruction*, a reincarnation comedy called *The Two Wills* is in progress in Paris, and *Kingdom of the Earth* will be a dual role film contrasting 14th century alchemy with 20th century atomy.

—Forest J. Ackerman

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LUTHER
SCHEFFY

Letters

from the Readers

NOW A PEN PAL

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Thanks very much for listing my name in the COSMIC PEN CLUB. It's opening a new and exciting hobby for me. I now find myself looking forward every day to making new friends via the postman. I'm grateful too to those who have written to me and I'm doing my best to be a good pen pal!

I enjoy the science briefs and the cartoons in TALES, and hope you'll be adding more of them as time goes on. The SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE department is the best I've seen in keeping me posted on the latest s-f films. I'm looking forward to the UFO department as this is a subject I'm keenly interested in.

The September issue of TALES was especially exciting and I'll be looking forward to the future issues. Now that I've become a steady reader of TALES, I soon hope to become a subscriber.

Rudolph A. Orosz
2822 Stanfield Dr.

Parma 34, Ohio
Glad you're making many new friends via the club. (As an aside to other readers, in sending in your listing for the club be sure and include age and occupation along with your hobbies, interests, etc. Many listings are not run simply because people neglect these details. We want everyone to know as much as possible about a pen pal in the limited space available.) Back to you, Rudy. We'll comment on the UFO business in answering another letter later in this section. Come, pal, rush that subscription in!wh

CARTOON BREAKDOWN

Dear Bill Hamling:

I think I can make valid criticisms against your mag. Take the September issue. With the exception of the Jorgensen story (which is trivial) all the stories in the issue were set in the same sort of future world; space ships, space-ports, and all sorts of zap-guns taken for granted as much as horses, hitching posts, and six-

guns in westerns. And it goes on from there; these stories have a common subject of violence and death. Aren't you in something of an editorial rut?

A few specific comments: Alex Blade's characterization of Laryl in the lead story was good; THE DEAD WORLD has a *deus ex machina* plot; in Garrett's story, one of the names seemed familiar . . . Bette Furness . . .?

The cartoon on page 101: my pet peeve again. So we have just discovered the facts of life, and we are very sophisticated, aren't we? And it's so amusing to have them pointed out again and again, ad nauseum. It would be interesting to find out how many times you have printed a cartoon of that sort. I have every issue of both IMAGINATION and IMAGINATIVE TALES right here, so . . . of the 345 cartoons so far published in your mags, 46 were Scheffy monster cartoons, and 36 had spacemen meeting girls and deciding to stay awhile. And 5 male and female robot cartoons.

May I present some ideas? Space-man in cooking pot, surrounded by hungry beautiful girls. Caption: "We're in the wrong cartoon!" Or this three-panel gag: 1. asteroid golf course, man teeing off; 2. view of asteroid, showing golf ball in orbit; 3. golfer hit in back of head by own ball. Or this: lunar housing project, real estate man saying, ". . . and here we have an early colonial house . . ." showing rocket hulk rebuilt for living.

See what I mean?

Dainis Bisenieks
Box 2065
Ann Arbor, Mich.

If we're in a rut, it's apparently one most readers enjoy. However, you do have a point, and we'll see about striving for more "story balance" in the future. As to the cartoons—man, we didn't know we had used 345 up to the September TALES. We've got enough in the file for a couple of hard-cover books!

We'll have to give that some serious thought . . . your ideas for the 3 cartoons aren't bad. Matter of fact we get a cute mental picture of the gags. Maybe you should be a cartoonist?wlh

SEXY COVER

Dear Ed:

Here is my opinion on the September issue of TALES, in order of preference.

1. THE COSMIC DESTROYER by Blade
2. MONSTER IN THE NIGHT by Williams
3. THE DEAD WORLD by Kastel
4. OUTPOST PERIL by Silverberg
5. KILLER FIRST-CLASS by Garrett
6. NEW YEAR'S EVE—2000 A.D. by Jorgensen

I have a gripe. There is too much killing in your yarns. I hope the world of the future will be one of peace and tranquility. I also wish you would have smarter heroes with less muscles. That is what I want and I am sure many readers will disagree with me. Well, I disagree with them.

Another thing, your covers. The cover for the September issue had nothing to do with the story and

the giant girl could have had more clothes on. You're getting too sexy. Stop it.

George Horace Wells
River Avenue, Box 486
Riverhead, N.Y.

Man, how could you have had the gal on the September cover dressed any further? The gal was covered from ankles to chin! You call that sexy? (Hah! Take a gander at ROGUE in the men's field. That's where you'll find delectable women!)wlh

TREAD SOFTLY ...?

Dear Editor:

I'm writing regarding the editorial in your September issue of TALES. Whatever new department you may be starting in your science fiction magazine, don't call it UFO REPORT. Better yet if you'll drop the idea entirely if prosperity on Earth means more to you than business. The UFO is not an imagination but a very serious business, and already lots of harm has been done to it. Appearance of UFO REPORT in fiction magazines may greatly contribute to this harm. Please be cautious when non-fiction science is concerned, as it's a platform on which YOU are standing too.

Igor O. Shkurkin
P.O. Box 497
Pittsburg, Cal.

Maybe we should drop dead with fright, huh? Haven't quite figured out if you're serious or just writing a crank note. Anyway, we got news for you. The UFO started in fiction magazines. You're simply a late comer. Matter of fact the whole business began in 1947 via

AMAZING STORIES of which we were managing editor. But back to the present and our September editorial. Actually—while this will please you, though only coincidentally—we'll probably drop the department. We simply have not received enough UFO reports to make it worthwhile as a regular feature. This is the type of thing requiring reader participation. We had it years back on AMAZING, but either no new sightings are going on, or readers have lost interest and are not reporting. As to the validity of UFO, you can't tell us much about that subject, pal. We helped raise those flying saucers!wlh

FAKE GIANTESS!

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have just finished reading the September issue of TALES and have a complaint to register. When I saw your magazine on the newsstand it was the cover by Lloyd Rognan that intrigued me. Here a beautiful blonde giantess was shown towering over several men. Naturally I got the impression that your feature novel was about giant gals, and was let down when I could find nothing in the magazine about this subject.

In the future why not have the lead story correspond with the cover, or vice-versa.

J. B. Marthaw
Santa Ana, Calif.

Fact is, the cover on the September issue did illustrate the lead novel, THE COSMIC DESTROYER. Rognan did a symbolic treatment, showing the girl who held this tremendous power as a sort of giantess, towering over man and

his puny machines. We're sorry if the symbolic treatment misled you—but that's the trouble with symbolism! We'll try and keep the scenes a bit more realistic in the future to eliminate the confusionwlh

CALLING RAY JONES

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is the first letter I have written to a science fiction magazine, although I have been a fan and avid collector for 5 years. My collection amounts to about 260 now. I have read MADGE for 4 years and TALES for 3 years. They are the best.

Could you possibly get Raymond F. Jones to do a story for you? He's my favorite.

I like your illos and cartoons, and of course, your wonderful stories.

Miss Judith A. Barr
555 Devonshire Rd.
Sarnia, Ont., Canada

We're glad you broke the ice, Judy. Now just keep up this letter writing. Make it a habit. In science fiction it's a whale of a lot of fun.

Ray Jones? Hey, Ray—how 'bout that!wlh

HORRORS YET!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

There's nothing I like better than a good horror movie, and when I say horror, I include science fiction too.

I'd like to see you "translate" horror films into novels for your magazines, something like AMAZING did recently. It would be fun to read the same story a film depicted.

I like the SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE department, naturally. This keeps me up to date with the forthcoming movies.

Burton Free
402 N. Carlisle St.
Bamberg, S.C.

If you're thinking about some of the "horror" movies we've seen lately, we couldn't stand seeing them in print! Man, they were horrible! . . . Which winds up shop for this issue, gang. Don't forget to use the subscription form enclosed in this issue!wlh

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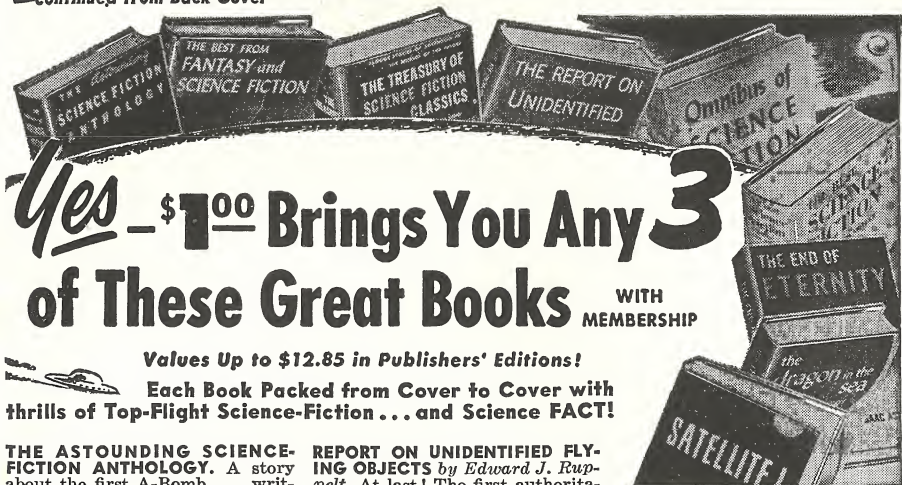
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